Barack Obama's Mass Shooting Eulogies: Tucson, Newtown, and Charleston as moral guideposts for a nation in crisis

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Abstract

Gun violence constitutes a nation-wide health crisis. Legislative attempts for reform have failed completely at the national level over the past decade. The public response to gun violence, however, has not supported reform. In the following study, I analyze three key speeches in the evolution of President Obama's campaign to pass gun safety reforms. In response, the president delivered seven speeches on gun violence before his re-election, including speeches in Fort Hood, Tucson, and Aurora. In this study, I examine three inflection points in the rhetorical legacy of Barack Obama's speeches on gun violence in America. Despite the investment of political capital and personal credibility throughout his presidency, he failed to achieve significant reform. In the dissertation, I offer one explanation for his failure to achieve legislative reform and consider his rhetorical prowess and strategic choices in times of national tragedy. Over his two terms in office, Barack Obama launched a national push to strengthen American gun regulations and failed. In Tucson, he avoided an immediate defeat over reform and set the stage for later actions. Obama announced in Newtown his commitment to reform. He directly leveraged the moral outrage of the moment to set an agenda for changing federal gun regulations. Despite substantial situational advantages, the president's push for reform failed. Newtown proved that practical arguments face significant barriers when confronting interest group politics and financial influence on Capitol Hill. Obama's final attempt to forward moral arguments for change occurred in Charleston. He articulated a vision of citizenship grounded in the principle of grace and depicted a politics and society that prioritized empathy and care between citizens. Each eulogy offered insight into President Obama's approach to the crisis of gun violence and revealed key limitations to the rhetorical influence of the president.

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America Under Fire

Rarely in my lifetime have I seen the type of civic engagement schoolchildren and their supporters demonstrated in Washington and other major cities throughout the country this past Saturday. These demonstrations demand our respect. They reveal the broad public support for legislation to minimize the risk of mass killings of schoolchildren and others in our society. That support is a clear sign to lawmakers to enact legislation prohibiting civilian ownership of semiautomatic weapons, increasing the minimum age to buy a gun from 18 to 21 years old, and establishing more comprehensive background checks on all purchasers of firearms. But the demonstrators should seek more effective and more lasting reform. They should demand a repeal of the Second Amendment. Concern that a national standing army might pose a threat to the security of the separate states led to the adoption of that amendment, which provides that "a well regulated militia, being necessary to the security of a free state, the right of the people to keep and bear arms, shall not be infringed." Today that concern is a relic of the 18th century.

- Supreme Court Justice John Paul Stevens, March 27, 2018

Gun violence constitutes a nation-wide health crisis. The Gun Violence Archive (2018) reported that 1332 mass shootings occurred in America between 2014 and 2017. 56,732 Americans were killed in firearm related incidents in that time and another 111,826 were injured. Mass shootings and gun deaths have increased in both frequency and scale since 2014. Twenty-seven percent more mass shootings occurred in 2017 than in 2014, and the rate of firearm deaths increased by 24% during that same period. The Centers for Disease Control (2015) reported that 10.5 Americans in 100,000 died to gun violence in 2014.[1] Compared to other post-industrial western democracies, Americans are twenty times more likely to die from gun violence and the

nation ranks first in gun ownership (Sanders 2014; Messerli and Bangalore 2013). The United States has higher rates of gun violence than most developing nations, and has similar rates of gun homicides to Iraq, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Pakistan (Leach-Kemon 2014). Clearly, the nation faces a crisis of gun violence that is both ongoing and substantial in its impact on its citizens health and safety.

Despite the continued gun violence in this country, gun ownership remains high. One explanation is the public perception that guns are needed as a form of personal protection (*Pew Research Center* 2014). Violent crime, however, has trended downward over the past decade. The Bureau of Justice Statistics found that violent crime decreased 13% over the past decade, and property crime is down 15% in the same period (Langton and Truman 2014). The best available data shows near historic lows in violent crime, and yet the public perception trends in the opposite direction (Kohut 2015). Given the public health risks posed by increased levels of gun ownership combined with lower rates of violent and property crime, one could expect strong support for gun safety reform.

Legislative attempts for reform have failed completely at the national level over the past decade. Data shows strong public support for these measures, yet the attempt to pressure Congress for national reform failed (*Pew Research Center* 2015; Saad 2012; Krouse 2015; Eakin 2014, 64-9). Quixotically, state laws were twice as likely to be loosened than tightened in 2013 and that trend has continued over the past few years (Nicas and Palazzolo 2013). A Harvard Business School study found that mass shootings are 75% more likely to lead to an unwinding of regulations on gun ownership rather than a tightening of said regulations in Republican controlled state legislatures (Luca, Malhotra, and Poliquin 2017). In states with Democratic controlled legislatures, there was no discernable impact on increasing restrictions. Despite the

attention given to mass shootings in the media and the flurry of rhetorical hand-wringing that follows them, little has been done either at the state or federal levels to curb gun violence.

The case for reform has been buttressed by overwhelming support for stronger regulations. Following the shooting at Sandy Hook elementary in December 2012, President Obama argued for strengthened regulations and took a series of executive actions designed to curb gun violence. All nine proposals forwarded in the last national push for reform had very strong support from the public (Saad 2013). Ninety-one percent of those surveyed after the legislation was proposed supported the measure to impose universal background checks, and 92% supported the measures to close purchasing loopholes (Saad 2012; 2013). Even more controversial measures showed substantial support. Eighty-two percent supported increasing funding for mental health support around the nation (Saad 2013). Seventy-five percent supported increasing penalties on people who evaded background checks, Sixty-seven percent supported a ban on armor-piercing bullets, and 60% supported a ban on assault weapons. Support for these measures cut across party lines (*Pew Research Center* 2015). In one Gallup poll, the organization recorded the highest support for gun control generally, 47%, since they began surveying the public on the issue (Saad 2013). Fifty-eight percent surveyed in the same poll indicated a preference for enforcing current laws more strictly. Despite very strong support for reform, Congress did not pass legislation strengthening regulations at the federal level.

Not only did Congress fail to pass legislation, new regulations did not even receive a vote on the floor of the House of Representatives or the Senate. The president outlined a series of legislative priorities in January 2013 as a response to the shooting at Newtown, priorities which became The Safe Communities, Safe Schools Act of 2013 (S. 649). The legislation was debated in March and April that year, but never received a vote in either house of Congress. Two

amendments were introduced by bipartisan co-authors, the Manchin-Toomey Amendment and Grassley-Cruz Substitute Amendment. Neither received enough votes to overcome cloture. In addition, four attempts to reinstate the Assault Weapons Ban have failed since its expiration in 2004 (Eakin 2014, 30-1). Another attempt at gun safety legislation, The Bipartisan Sportsmen's Act of 2014 (S. 2363) was given consideration by the full Senate, but never received a vote (Krouse 2015). Repeated attempts to pass legislation, supported by public opinion and strong administrative leadership from President Obama, all failed to pass Congress.

After the push for legislation failed, momentum for a change in federal regulations lessened substantially. The public grew more tepid in their support for gun control and public attitudes have remained divided since 2013. Support for specific policies remained high, but The Pew Research Center found that attitudes about gun control in general remained split along partisan lines and between owners and non-owners of firearms (Parker et al. 2017, 61-4). Gun owners were more likely to support gun rights, and non-owners were more likely to support gun safety measures. Pew Research (2014) also found that 52% of respondents supported gun rights over gun control as a political priority and 57% felt guns protected people from violent crime. Opinions have become static over time, hardening on either side of the divide. One in 10 Americans since the Newtown shooting have made up their mind about support for gun control. Gallup (2015) also found in one study that 63% of Americans surveyed felt that guns make the home a safer place. The best data clearly show that attitudes about gun violence have shifted against gun safety reform.

This change in attitudes does not comport with evidence that stricter laws on gun ownership and purchasing have a substantial effect on crime reduction (Squires 2000; 2014; Qvortrup 2014). Nations, states, cities, and communities with stricter gun safety laws see lower

rates of gun violence generally, and the policies that target assault rifles and other military-grade weaponry have the most impact on crime rates (Squires 2014). The most recent international data supports the conclusion that fewer guns equal fewer gun crimes. Empirical examples support this hypothesis as well. In Australia, twelve days after a mass shooting at Port Royal, Tasmania in 1996, the government banned assault style firearms and gun violence dropped by 6% every year afterward (Chapman et al. 2006). A shooter killed 16 children in Dunblane, Scotland the same year, and the British government responded the next year by banning automatic weapons and handguns (Baker 2015). As a result, only 2 percent of Scotland's police forces carry firearms and an officer-related shooting has not occurred since 2009.

In addition, there is substantial evidence that firearm ownership increases the likelihood of dying by homicide or suicide (Dahlberg, Ikeda, and Kresnow 2004; Wiebe 2003). For every use of a gun in self-defense, 11 people attempt suicide with a firearm, 7 assaults with a firearm occur, and 4 unintentional or accidental shootings occur (Kellerman et al. 1998). Despite the widespread belief cited above that crime is on the rise, only 1% of all contact crimes involve a firearm (Hemenway and Solnick 2015). More guns do not reduce crime; in fact, the opposite is true. There is a strong correlation between strict controls on the deadliest firearms and decreased levels of homicides by firearm (Qvortrup 2014). Gun ownership also correlates with higher levels of violent crimes involving firearms and homicides (Monuteaux et al. 2015). Clearly, the available evidence supports stricter controls on firearm ownership and purchasing.

The public response to gun violence, however, has not supported reform. When new legislation or regulations are debated in the public square, America responds by arming itself (Eakin 2014, 36). Mass shootings and the fear of gun control ensure that incidents like Newtown or Tucson drive more ammunition and firearms sales. These increases in sales are tied directly to

the perception that crime is increasing and that guns make us safer, a perception that mass shootings only reinforce every time they occur (*Pew Research Center* 2014). Public opinion and the bleak future for legislative reform in Congress on firearms led one *New York Times* columnist to ask if the National Rifle association "has in fact won – this era of the gun debate in this country" (Blow 2015). *The Economist* (2015) sees the gun control agenda as "doomed" because the N.R.A. so dominates the issue and exerts overwhelming influence on members of the legislature. In the public debate over gun control, better arguments are losing and the best evidence and data does not seem to shift the balance of the debate. Despite declining risk from violent crime and evidence that guns pose a substantial danger both in the home and in the public square, gun control advocates have been unable to transform good reasons and evidence into overwhelming public support for reform.

In the following project, I develop three case studies of presidential address on the issue of firearm regulations and mass shootings. I focus specifically on the Obama administration and examine three eulogies he delivered after mass shootings during his presidency. In the following section, I review the relevant literature about gun control. First, I look more broadly at studies on gun control and gun violence. Then, I examine rhetorical and argumentation-based studies in a more thorough manner. Following the review of literature, I lay out the methodology of the case studies and outline the chapters of the study.

Review of literature

Three types of studies have dominated the scientific and humanistic inquiry into firearms: medical, sociological or criminological, and communication-oriented. One researcher representative of the medical approach is David Hemenway, perhaps the foremost health expert researching the impact of firearms. His research framed gun violence as a public health crisis. He found that the "proactive, community-oriented approach" of a public health focus can identify

"risk factors, trends, and causes of health problems" using "sound science" as a foundation for understanding how to combat a "modern-day public health epidemic" (Hemenway 2004, 8-9). His research included analyses of gun theft (Hemenway, Azrael, and Miller 2017), homicides committed by children (Hemenway and Solnick 2017), the interaction between firearm laws and homicides (Lee et al. 2017; Hemenway 2016) and included more longitudinal and systemic analyses of scientific evidence supporting reform (Hemenway and Nolan 2016). Hemenway's research concluded that (1) more action is necessary to resolve the ongoing health crisis and (2) stricter laws instituting more background checks and regulations on firearms and ammunition exert significant downward pressure on violent crime.

One well known criminological study by John Lott (1998a; 1998b) concluded that "More Guns" led to "Less Crime." Lott's research, however, was directly challenged by other experts. National Academy of Sciences collected data sets and studies across the nation and concluded that the available data did not support Lott's hypothesis:

> It is not possible to reach any scientifically supported conclusion because of (a) the sensitivity of the empirical results to seemingly minor changes in model specification, (b) a lack of robustness of the results to the inclusion of more recent years of data (during which there were many more law changes than in the earlier period), and (c) the statistical imprecision of the results. The evidence to date does not adequately indicate either the sign or the magnitude of a causal link between the passage of right-to-carry laws and crime rates. Furthermore, this uncertainty is not likely to be resolved with the existing data and methods. If further headway is to be made, in the committee's judgment, new analytical approaches and data are needed. (Wellford, Pepper, and Petrie 2005, 7)

Matt Qvortrup (2014) also debunked Lott's hypothesis. His analysis showed a significant statistical correlation between ownership of guns in a society and high levels of homicide, particularly in countries with weak regulatory frameworks. Qvortrup also found that assault weapon bans are highly effective at reducing violent crime, a finding directly refuting Lott's hypothesis. The best evidence and data show that sensible reforms and regulations contribute to the reduction in death by firearm.

Sociological approaches to firearm studies examine how guns affect social norms and mores (Kellner 2014; Worrell 2014; Agger 2014; Young 2014; Luke 2014; Kimmel and Leek 2014). For example, Peter Squires (2014) examined how "weaponization 're-makes' masculinity, militarizing the mind and attaching a lethal capacity to youthful immaturity" (6). His studies showed that firearms magnify aspects of militarization and masculinity in a society, taking into account economic and political factors. Squires aimed to "connect the dynamics of weaponization to the cultural contexts of gun use and misuse, the relations of gun supply and demand, and crime prevention, law and policy-making and law enforcement" (9). Squires found in his global, longitudinal study that nations with a fragmented political or social order turned to gun ownership as an individual response to rising levels of economic, political, or social uncertainty. Even in countries with a "robust democratic resistance" to interest group politics, modern nations can have difficulty maintaining low levels of gun violence where political and social norms are dysfunctional (329). His studies highlighted how individual fears and expectations of safety and certainty contributed significantly to shaping attitudes about firearms. These studies situated the problem within larger cultural or social norms and mores but failed to examine ways to build public support for reform to explain why reform efforts often fail. Sociological approaches highlighted norms and mores that contributed to escalating levels of

firearm violence but did not direct scholars toward solutions to overcome partisan and ideological divides over gun control.

Communication and rhetoric scholars also conducted research over firearms and their impact on society. The approaches varied according to the study timeline and goals of the project but included movement studies, analysis of public address, argumentation approaches, narrative analysis, and generic analysis. One of the earliest scholarly attempts to understand how guns and American rhetoric interact was by Gregg Lee Carter (1997). In his social movement studies on the failure of the gun control movement, Carter identified four major factors that undermined the success of gun control groups in America. (1) The National Rifle Association changed its mission in 1972 when Harlon B. Carter refocused the organization on political advocacy rather than public awareness and began to campaign against legislation restricting the sale and ownership of firearms (78-9). (2) The organization aggressively expanded its membership and its lobbying efforts on Capitol Hill (80-2) over the next 30 years. (3) The size and strength of the National Rifle Association allowed the organization to launch a countermovement against gun control advocates when they moved to pass tighter regulations (107-11). (4) The influence wielded on Capitol Hill undermined new regulations, and their popular membership and support allowed them to further increase their influence in Washington. The influence of the NRA was sufficient to defeat gun control advocacy groups like Handgun Control Inc. and prevent their legislative priorities from succeeding (108-9). Carter concluded that the NRA's disproportionate influence directly undermined efforts at the national and local level to press for gun safety legislation (111-3).

Kristen Goss (2006) conducted a study of the gun control movement and found that the strategies used by the groups supporting reform were fundamentally flawed. Goss argued that

gun control advocates “sought to win purely by the force of their ideas, rather than by mobilizing a constituency” and lost the battle to a far more powerful group (195). Gun rights advocates took a political approach to winning the issue and mobilized elites and experts against the changes to regulations. One example of an expert mobilized in the service of the gun rights agenda is John Lott (1998a; 1998b). Goss (2006) argued that the American system could not implement wholesale firearm safety reform because it did not contain the political structures necessary to overcome the passion of gun rights advocates (190-1). Goss also argued that the supporters of gun rights were more successful at framing the question of gun ownership and persuading everyday citizens about the desirability of gun ownership than supporters of gun control (192-3). Phillip Cook and Goss (2014) argued in another study that gun rights advocates exhibited more discipline and passion than their counterparts in the reform movement (189-202). They were more likely to donate to, vote for, and campaign for candidates. They had higher levels of political involvement, and this translated directly into a higher level of efficacy for their policy goals than gun control advocates (196). The gun control movement faced many barriers to success according to these studies, including better funded and more dedicated opponents. Reform supporters forwarded the better arguments, but the public responded more to fears of crime rather than studies showing crime had fallen and supportive of gun safety regulation. Social movement studies offer an indispensable window into the successes and failures of the gun control movement and provide insight on how to strategize for political advocacy and activism.

Public address scholars have also studied gun control and public statements and discussions of the issue. However, there are major gaps in this research. Medhurst (2015) found “how very little the field of rhetorical studies has done regarding Second Amendment issues”

(331). Scholars seemed to notice this trend and several studies have been published recently. Researchers examined the questions of rhetoric and violence, and how firearms and firearm violence influence public discourse (Boser and Lake 2014; Frank 2014; Goodnight 2014; Hogan and Rood 2015; Hollihan and Smith 2014; Lunceford 2015; Rood 2017; Schildkraut and Muschert 2014; Smith and Hollihan 2014; Stuckey and O'Rourke 2014; Welch 2014). Hollihan and Smith (2014) argued that the public debate about the shooting of Gabrielle Giffords focused on "what national standards, values, or even notions of human decency and respect should be demanded of those who would seek to communicate their positions in the public forum" (Hollihan and Smith 2014, 579). They found that shifting the public discussion away from policies towards a debate about decency and decorum obfuscated questions about political reform and focused on issues of "responsibility, blame, justice, and civility" (579). Smith and Hollihan (2014) argued in a subsequent article that conservative responses to the shooting in Tucson undermined public reasoning and distorted narratives about the tragedy. Questions of "guilt, disorder, purification, and agency" dominated the discussion surrounding the shooting, and Smith and Hollihan found that four central strategies anchored the conservative response to the shooting: (1) Conservatives preempted discussion by arguing that reasoned discourse was impossible in post-Tucson political environment, (2) They denied that incitements to violence by members of the Republican Party during the 2012 midterm elections had any causal link to the motivations for the Tucson shooter, (3) They argued that the shooter was motivated by leftist radical groups and liberal ideology, (4) They disassociated the shooting from political ideology or partisanship altogether, situating the motivation for the shooting with narratives of mental disability (594-8). In addition, conservative pundits presented the shooter as a scapegoat. They cast him as a victim of a failing mental health system and ignored a more nuanced understanding

of the health issues surrounding gun violence (606-8). As a palliative for these problems with discourse about mass shootings, Hollihan and Smith argued that public address studies should attempt to get people "to come together to propose, debate, and adopt policy solutions to help prevent, or at least reduce the frequency of, future incidences of gun violence" (581).

Boser and Lake (2014) analyzed the rhetoric a single voice in the gun debate, Sarah Palin. Their study examined the effect of Palin's video recorded response to the Tucson shooting on public discourse. Palin used the language of praise and blame in a video she released on Facebook titled "America's Enduring Strength" to pit virtuous citizens against vicious ones. In the video, Palin valorized personal responsibility and free speech but ignored questions about her own responsibility for the vitriolic political atmosphere. Boser and Lake contended that Palin's accusatory tone, invocation of "blood libels," and confrontational language foreclosed "any space in which a real conversation about civil discourse potentially could begin" (633). Palin's strategy represented similar discourses to those circulated by the Tea Party during the 2010 midterms. She invoked images and metaphors of militarism and violence to stoke fear and hatred for the opposition. Palin, and by extension the Tea Party, offered a framework for understanding firearms in a social and political context for American citizens, but valorized a certain kind of speech and particular type of citizen. Boser and Lake's work revealed that speech acts of praise and blame can operate as weapons of propaganda and ideological control. Palin's speech, they argued, can lead citizens to abandon political and social judgements based on reason and evidence and potentially undermines the functions of our deliberative democracy.

Other studies highlighted the diversity of methodological approaches applied to the gun debate. Goodnight (2014) argued that Giffords' life itself represented a model of courage and civility in a time of incivility and vitriolic partisanship. Goodnight posited that Giffords' model

of heroism allowed her to find a new sense of agency after her attempted assassination (700-2). Goodnight also found that the inability for Giffords to advance even a modest gun control agenda revealed a growing divide between the political parties on Capitol Hill. Stuckey and O'Rourke (2014) examined efforts to maintain functional democratic institutions and deliberative processes in the wake of an assassination attempt. They considered what citizens viewed as civil discourse and how interpretations of political talk affected democratic norms. They concluded that popular notions of civility were insufficient to produce effective democratic practices (717-8).

Two studies examined the gun control debate as a form of public storytelling. Schildkraut and Muschert (2014) examined how media outlets and public officials provided information about mass shootings and framed the event in social and political narratives. They found that news media distort the public's understanding of high-profile shooting events by focusing on mass-casualty events at the expense of everyday gun violence. Media prioritized the story of the perpetrator at the expense of other narratives that might produce political reform. They concluded that policymakers and media organizations would only produce sensible reform when "protracted, extended discourse about school shootings and related massacres" occurs between the people, the press, and their representatives (77). James Welsh (2014) examined the social influence of guns in American culture. He argued that stories of American history and national origin myths charged the image of the firearm with a symbolic power rooted in culture and mythology (134). Deeply rooted attitudes about guns form from stories about the revolution, pioneers, the Wild West, and cowboy culture generated strong cultural resonance for guns in American life. This "ethos of the gun" short-circuited arguments about gun control, making reasoned debates in public "all but intractable" (134). He concluded that neither reason nor

"emotional outrage over any given mass killing" was sufficient to solve the problem (154-5). Both studies highlighted the importance of storytelling in the public debate over gun control and revealed deeply entrenched cultural beliefs about firearms that undermined opportunities for reform.

David A. Frank (2014) examined two speeches analyzed in this dissertation, Tucson and Newtown, and stark differences between Obama's approaches to each situation. Frank argued that Obama called for "contemplation and dialogue" in Tucson and placed the possibility for reform "beyond the pale of public deliberation" (654-5). He argued that Obama situated guns as "an object of worship and veneration, immune to questioning" and removed them from the arena of public debate (ibid). Frank concluded that Obama failed to generate support for reform because he placed deliberation about gun control outside the realm of possible national dialogue. He found that the president took a significantly different approach following the Newtown shooting. Frank argued that the Newtown eulogy resolved citizens' trauma more effectively for three reasons: (1) Obama placed the causes of violence within the reach of policy reforms by locating the responsibility for protecting schoolchildren with their parents, (2) He brought the values outlined in the Tucson speech into congruence with the policy approach developed after the Newtown shooting, and (3) He acknowledged the complexity of regulating firearms in America and focused on the agency of individual citizens to halt that violence (668-9). While Frank's work on the Newtown and Tucson speeches provides valuable insight, he does not explain the different eulogistic variations enacted by the president, nor does he explain why Obama's rhetorical choices in Newtown failed to alter the debate about gun safety regulations. Recent scholarship vastly improved upon previous studies into gun violence rhetoric, but there are substantial opportunities for further inquiry.

The studies I have discussed provided key information about gun control debates. None examined how arguments can be developed within a eulogy as a way to move public opinion and enact reform. Medical research provided key epidemiological information about firearms as a public health issue but had no prescription for reforming our laws. Sociological studies revealed the stark differences between American gun ownership and violence and the rates of firearm violence in other industrialized and developing countries. They did not examine why citizens in America were so resistant to persuasion in favor of gun safety legislation. Movement studies provided excellent hindsight analysis of the failures of particular strategies or tactics but revealed little about why certain strategies resonated and others did not. Public address studies provided insight into linkages between speaking in public and violence from firearms but overlooked the methods that speakers use to integrate public policy arguments into eulogies for mass shooting victims. None examined the arc of Obama's eulogies for mass shooting victims, nor did they trace how strategic choices by the president changed over time.

In this dissertation, I examine three speeches delivered by Obama that were designed to influence public opinion on gun control. The project contributes to rhetorical studies by developing a theory about the success and failure of argument on a major public policy crisis. It also adds to communication studies more generally by analyzing strategies developed in response to shifting public opinion and political constraints. Rhetorical studies scholars are uniquely situated to analyze and unpack strategies developed in response to mass-shooting events in society. By focusing on the president's response to the gun violence crisis, I illuminate how arguments developed in eulogistic settings evolve over time and highlight several attempts to persuade citizens and lawmakers to support reform. In the following section, I outline the

methodology of the study and describe my analysis procedures for examining the function, purpose, and outcome of Obama's three major mass shooting eulogies.

Methodology

Gun safety reform suffers from immense ideological gridlock and hyper-partisan commitment. Public opinion strongly favored increasing regulations on firearm ownership, yet relevant decision-makers do not reform laws. Michael Hogan and Craig Rood (2015) described the situation as "polarized, divisive, and unproductive" and claimed the debate suffers from a "deliberative impasse" that prevented attempts to reform (361). James Welch (2014) argued the situation is "all but intractable" because reason and evidence-oriented argument could not overcome deeply rooted mythological and ideological commitments to gun ownership (134). Rhetorical scholars researching the intersection of public debate and firearm legislation largely agreed that reform is unlikely in the current political climate.

Despite the uptick in research on gun rights, there is little agreement on how to investigate a topic so fraught with ideological landmines and stalked by the shadow of public violence (Amsden 2014; Boser and Lake 2014; Cook and Goss 2014; Frank 2014). Hogan and Rood (2015) found that work on gun control by communications scholars was "narrowly focused" and failed to develop "a coherent narrative of how we arrived at today's deliberative impasse" (364). Specifically, they cited a dearth of studies that examined arguments and debates over gun violence and regulations. One approach, they argue, could identify "key players, important policy texts, and transformative moments in debates over guns and gun control policies" and analyze their effect on public debates about guns (ibid). President Barack Obama was a key player whose interest in the gun control debate was more than passing. He spoke many times on the issue during his presidency (Liptak and Williams 2015) and his speeches merit examination for this dissertation. The former president wielded exceptional communication skills

and rhetorical influence (Ceaser 1981; Medhurst 1996; Tulis 1987) attempting to sway members of the public and key decision-makers to reform gun laws. Obama's speeches memorializing the victims of mass shootings represent his attempt to resolve the crisis of gun violence in America through the power of speech and clearly should be the focus of rhetorical analysis.

Additionally, Hogan and Rood (2015) suggested that critics should focus on the "recurrent themes and appeals" found in the rhetoric of key players in the debate (362). Because Obama's speeches on gun violence represent an effort to resolve the deliberative impasse over gun control, the strategic choices he made in response to the crisis are worthy subjects of study. Connecting traumatic events to value-based argument requires the use of many rhetorical strategies including appeals to symbols, stories and narratives, and arguments for change (Burke 1969, 60; 1974, 103-6). In this study, I will analyze the role of these elements in the service of the president's agenda. Any analysis of Obama's gun control speeches should focus on his strategic moves and their impact on the debate over reform.

In the remainder of this study, I examine three key eulogies delivered by President Obama after mass shootings. Each speech is a touchstone of Obama's discourse on gun control. Leff and Sachs (1990) defined a rhetorical touchstone as "a paradigm of rhetorical excellence," a speech "which concretely embodies the potential of the art and exploits resources common to the art in an exemplary fashion" (269). For each case study, I performed an inductive analysis of the speech, examined the themes, arguments, and values articulated by the president, and drew conclusions about the impact of those choices on the speech's efficacy. I also collected relevant historical and contextual data to understand audience expectations and situational constraints facing the president and examined audience response data to measure the president's level of success. In each chapter, I explain the failure of Obama's eulogies to hasten gun reform

legislation. Each speech represented an inflection point in the president's overall campaign to reform gun laws in America. Consequently, each chapter contributes to understanding the president's rhetorical trajectory and how it shifted in response to changing situational constraints.

Tucson, Newtown, and Charleston embodied Obama's efforts to persuade the public to support gun safety reform. He spoke to the public in moments of national grief and sorrow across the nation. Each represented a key moment in Obama's arguments for reform. I chose to examine eulogies, both because of the recognition the speeches received and in order to avoid making comparisons across genres. Each speech utilized eulogistic form, but each also represented a response to unique contextual demands. Examination of one form of public address is particularly useful because the analysis can investigate the development of strategic responses over time in a single genre.

Plan of the study

In the following study, I analyze three key speeches in the evolution of President Obama's campaign to pass gun safety reforms. During his first term, Obama disappointed many gun control advocates who supported his first campaign for president. One powerful advocacy group, the Brady Campaign (2010; O'Brien 2010), assigned Obama an "F" in 2010 for failing to press forward on any gun control measure after his election. The report, titled "Failed Leadership, Lost Lives," called the president to task for ignoring a campaign promises and casting gun control aside for health care reform. Critics accused the president of being "notably silent" and "playing it safe" on gun control (*Christian Science Monitor* 2012; Dwyer 2012; Lupica 2012). In response, the president delivered seven speeches on gun violence before his re-election, including speeches in Fort Hood, Tucson, and Aurora.

Tucson stands out as an exemplar among these speeches and it represents the most important of Obama's early gun control eulogies. In the first case study, I analyze the eulogy in

Tucson as an exemplar of the *national eulogy*, a speech after national tragedy that comforts the entire nation (Campbell and Jamieson 2008). I examine contextual elements surrounding the gun debate in 2010 and 2011 and outline the theory of a national eulogy as category of presidential genre. In the analysis, I argue that Obama enacted all the formal requirements of the genre but chose not to launch an agenda for reform due to significant situational barriers to change. Finally, I conclude that Obama's Tucson eulogy reveals inherent limitations in the genre of the national eulogy. Deep polarization that pits citizen against citizen undermines a president's ability to speak to the people as one.

Next, I examine President Obama's speech in response to the massacre at Sandy Hook Elementary in Newtown, Connecticut. The shooting took the lives of 20 schoolchildren and 6 teachers and administrators. A sense of "moral urgency" followed the shooting, with nation-wide calls for the president and congress to pass new regulations (Esposito, Smith, and Ng 2012; Roberts 2012; Romm 2012). In his Newtown eulogy, Obama pledged support for reforms and demanded immediate and sweeping changes to gun laws (Connor and Williams 2012; Obama 2012b). Despite support from the public, a commission on gun violence headed by Vice President Biden, and twenty-three executive actions, nothing passed Congress. The speech and its aftermath were a key test for the president at the start of his second term.

I begin the chapter with a brief description of the shooting and the aftermath and continue by outlining the theory of rhetorical hybrids and the *deliberative eulogy* (Jamieson and Campbell 1982). I conclude that Newtown represents a quintessential example of the deliberative eulogy. Obama adapted to the situation in Newtown and placed the eulogistic elements of the speech in the service of policy-oriented goals and proclamations. I conclude that his failure after Newtown reveals core deficiencies in our political system, deficiencies related to influence peddling and

interest-groups. Reasoned arguments and public consensus in favor of new regulations failed to change any federal laws. In the third study, I examine the eulogy following the shooting at Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. The shooter proclaimed openly his white supremacy and freely admitted that racial animosity drove his decision to kill the black members of the church (O'Shea, Simon, and Yan 2016). After the Charleston shooting, a conversation about the Confederate flag ensued (Pierce 2015) but a discussion about gun safety reform did not occur (Winter 2015). While President Obama and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke openly about the need for stricter regulations on firearm ownership and purchasing, other leaders were notably quiet (Schleifer 2015). Obama's Charleston eulogy was his final major gun control eulogy as president and represents a fitting capstone to his role as consoler in chief. In the final case study, I describe the context surrounding the Charleston speech, outline a theory for understanding Charleston as a eulogistic jeremiad, and argue that Obama successfully enacted this rhetorical hybrid. I also explain why his successful enactment of the hybrid did not reshape the public debate.

In this study, I examine three inflection points in the rhetorical legacy of Barack Obama's speeches on gun violence in America. Despite the investment of political capital and personal credibility throughout his presidency, he failed to achieve significant reform. In the following chapters, I offer one explanation for his failure to achieve legislative reform and consider his rhetorical prowess and strategic choices in times of national tragedy.

Tucson – Restraint in a time of Vitriol

I heard what I thought was gunfire. For about half a second, I'm like, 'Oh, maybe it's fireworks.' And then I heard someone say 'Gun!' and it clicked: I remembered some of the things that had happened over the last several months. There was a campaign event where an angry constituent had brought a gun but dropped it. And then the door of her congressional office in Tucson was shot at or smashed last March, after the vote on health care.

Daniel Hernandez, intern to Congresswoman Giffords

On January 8, 2011, a meeting between Arizona Congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and her constituents at a local Safeway grocery store was interrupted by gunfire. Nothing was extraordinary or special about the location. It was a "banal public space," "designed by developers" with "no real glue" or "central character" (Zoellner 2012). Six people died, thirteen were injured, and the congresswoman was grievously wounded by a gunshot wound to the head. President Obama travelled to Tucson four days after the shooting to speak to the community. He delivered a speech to "droves" of people at the University of Arizona (Carlmark 2011). The Tucson speech was not the first time the president spoke to memorialize the victims of a mass shooting, but it was the first critical speech on gun violence that Obama delivered. Seen by some as a "turning point" for the president in his first term, Obama displayed many of the same strategies that he would use for other mass shooting memorials and consequently, Tucson provides a blueprint for understanding Obama's later eulogies (Thomma 2011; *The Week* 2011). The Tucson eulogy was also important for historic and political reasons.

Tucson was the first time a Member of Congress had been shot in an assassination attempt in nearly forty years. President Obama faced a newly elected Republican House majority

that seemed unlikely to pass new gun control measures despite overwhelming data supporting the case for sensible reform (Squires 2000; Squires 2014; Qvortrup 2014). Additionally, the Tucson shooting sparked national discussions about gun control, mental illness, and partisan politics (Hollihan and Smith 2014). Notions of "human decency and respect" were up for debate, and arguments about what norms were conducive for public deliberation and political organizing were mustered on both sides (ibid, 579). Ultimately, the shooting of Congresswoman Giffords led to a discussion about the political conditions in American politics, but not a deliberation about the best policies to implement.

President Obama deferred the opportunity to begin a national debate about gun control in his Tucson speech, exhibiting restraint in a situation that did not favor him. Rather than exert political influence to jumpstart a national discussion about gun violence, Obama described a vision of civic engagement in the Tucson speech that he hoped would produce the conditions for reform without directly pressing for a specific policy change. He developed a balanced argument in Tucson that situated long-term visions for reform within the limits of his political situation.

I argue in the following case study that contextual barriers to reform prevented President Obama from making an immediate push for reform. Rather than speak to the issue directly, he constructed a principled defense of political conditions conducive to change. In the Tucson eulogy, Obama outlined political preconditions for reform without making a strategic misstep in the speech that would have undermined future opportunities to press for change. Obama told stories of the victims of the Tucson shooting to argue for a shift in values toward greater empathy and communication with our fellow citizens. In their life stories, he crafted an argument that politics based on reasonable argument and empathy could sustain the burden of a national debate over sensible gun reform. In developing this argument, I describe the substantial political

and attitudinal barriers facing reform and argue that the Tucson speech used long-term strategies not designed to win the debate over gun control in the moment but make a debate about gun control tomorrow possible.

Context as a substantial deterrent

President Obama faced daunting barriers to reform in early 2011. American attitudes were not in favor of gun control. Evidence for reform was substantial and widely available but did not affect public attitudes on the issue. Speaking about the need for gun safety reform in Tucson would likely drain, not generate support heading into the 2012 re-election campaign. Cook and Goss (2014) found that Americans opposing gun control exhibited more organizational acumen, electoral discipline and energy than those supporting new reforms. Any attempt to push for gun control risked generating vigorous opposition. A newly elected Republican majority in the House of Representatives seemed unlikely to pass legislation. The National Rifle Association increased its influence after the midterm elections, largely due to the rise of Tea Party groups around the nation, reinforcing Republican opposition to gun control. Obama faced serious situational headwinds after Tucson.

Public support for gun control declined prior to the Tucson shooting. 44% of Americans supported gun control generally, down 5% from 2008 and 35% since 1990 (Newport 2010). CBS News found support even lower at 40% in April 2010 and called the political landscape for sensible reforms a “nightmare” (*The Economist* 2010). At the same time, general weakness in support concealed stronger attitudes toward specific reform measures. Opposition to loosening firearm regulations remained strong. More than half of Americans surveyed opposed open carry laws (Wing 2010). 56% of registered voters opposed concealed carry laws, and a majority also said they felt “less safe” when they knew someone was carrying a concealed weapon in public (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence n.d., “Polling”). Five in six Americans favored universal

background checks, including seven in ten members of the NRA (ibid). On face it seemed that the politics of gun control were indeed a nightmare, but the surface level data obscured support for specific reforms.

Several other contextual limitations reveal difficulties facing the president. Declining support for gun control preceded the 2008 election and was accelerated by fear that the president would dramatically increase gun regulations (Newport 2010). Only 44% of Americans supported gun control and 74% thought violent crime was on the rise (ibid). Fear of crime reached record highs while crime itself set record lows. Increased public support for progressive social issues like gay marriage and medical marijuana did not spill over to affect opinions on gun control (Omero 2009). Opposition to reform also correlated more closely with economic status than with political ideology indicating that polarization, while significant, was not the primary factor driving opposition to reform (Pew Research Center 2011). Policy initiatives on gun control seemed unlikely to generate support for other agenda items and Obama could not use the issue to run for re-election.

Calls for reform also failed to generate political energy beyond a small network of dedicated activists who supported stricter gun control. Opponents of gun control measures were more likely to donate to, vote for, and campaign on behalf of candidates on that issue alone (Cook and Goss 2014). This translated into successful legislative action rolling back regulations in states and litigation challenging, and eventually overturning laws at the federal level (ibid, 196). While opponents of gun control were energized, supporters were not. Only 1% of Americans found gun violence to be the most pressing issue facing America (Newport 2010). By contrast, 80% of Tea Party supporters opposed any gun control measures (Pew Research Center

2011). The politics of gun control were clearly in favor of its opponents – the NRA and the Tea Party.

A significant lack of political will also blocked reform. Newly elected Republicans seemed unlikely to compromise on gun control (Newport 2010). Obama could not pursue reform without significant shifts in congressional power. The president signed two actions on gun safety prior to Tucson—removing federal prohibitions on firearms in national parks and allowing concealed carry on Amtrak trains (O'Brien 2010). If anything, the Obama administration had signaled that it was moving away from stricter gun control measures prior to Tucson.

The Supreme Court decision in *District of Columbia v. Heller*, 554 U.S. 570 (2008) also made sweeping gun control unlikely. Writing for a 5-4 majority, Antonin Scalia upheld the court's precedent *United States v. Miller*, 307 U. S. 174 (1939) arguing it "is not only consistent with, but positively suggests, that the Second Amendment confers an individual right to keep and bear arms" (Scalia 2008). The *Heller* decision offered the most expansive interpretation of the Second Amendment in the Supreme Court's history. Given the court ruling, congressional opposition, and lack of resonance of pro-gun control arguments, it is no surprise that Obama declined to pursue reform after Tucson.

Obama faced a more obvious political limitation as well. Democrats lost their majority in the House of Representatives, nearly lost control of the Senate, and lost dozens of races at the state level. The losses constrained the president's "horizon of possibilities" and severely limited his issue prioritization in 2011 and 2012 (Baker 2010, A1). Additionally, bipartisan cooperation seemed unlikely due to an atmosphere of bitter partisanship. Political scientists Thomas Mann and Norman Orenstein (2006) studied partisan polarization and found evidence of a major breakdown in the functioning of the legislature. "Partisan tensions, the demise of the regular

order, and growing incivility" between individual members led to the extreme dysfunction of the legislative system (ibid, 11). The new Republican majority in the House only magnified these problems, prompting Mann and Orenstein (2012) to release another study that revealed deep structural flaws in Congress. Political hostage taking exacerbated problems of gridlock and partisanship and engendered a vicious cycle of cynicism, distrust, and influence peddling. Tensions were so high that prospects for any bipartisan reform seemed remote. Progress on intensely controversial issues, like gun control, was out of the question.

The rise of Tea Party organizations also contributed to the president's constraints. They forged alliances between disparate groups within the Republican Party, including some fringe elements that had been largely inactive during the George W. Bush presidency (Montgomery 2010). Gun rights extremists, secessionists, and white supremacist organizations joined together to support the Tea Party and oppose Obama's reforms (Neiwert 2010). The Tea Party used these connections to increase its share of influence within the Republican party. Many on the extreme right used this uneasy alliance to expand their member networks, secure increased funding and attention, and mainstream their extremism within conservative ideology. The Southern Poverty Law Center (2010) identified 512 Patriot organizations before the rise of the Tea Party in 2009, a number that more than doubled to 1274 identifiable organizations including 334 active militias within two years. Unquestionably, the Tea Party activated fringe elements within the Republican party already stridently opposed to gun control.

Increased activity and influence of extremist groups also strengthened the nation's largest gun lobby, the National Rifle Association (NRA). In 1972, the NRA fundamentally changed its mission. Harlon B. Carter moved the organization away from educational and safety programs towards a political, pro-rights, anti-regulation agenda (Carter 1997). In the wake of these

changes, its political influence grew substantially (ibid, 111-3). The NRA used this newfound influence to push for gun rights legislation, working to weaken existing laws or push for new laws codifying concealed and open carry policies at the state and local level (Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence n.d., “Open Carrying”). The Tea Party enabled the NRA to expand its power at the state and federal levels by increasing its membership and political influence. Between 2009 and 2013, the organization collected $100 million more in revenues and $60 million more in membership dues than the previous four-year period (Hendricks and DeFrancesco 2015). The NRA converted new income into political influence, nearly doubling its spending on lobbying (Center for Responsive Politics 2016). Compared to gun control supporting groups, the pro-gun lobby spent twenty-two times as much on lobbying and employed five times as many lobbyists in the nine months prior to the 2010 midterm election (Beckel 2011). Increased power by the NRA ensured that any fight to pass stricter gun safety legislation would be politically costly for President Obama and members of Congress. It would require the efforts of moderates on both sides of the aisle who would risk their own political fortunes by supporting gun control legislation.

The NRA also influenced political messages during the 2010 midterms. The NRA, the Gun Owners of America, The Citizens Committee for the Right to Keep and Bear Arms, The National Shooting Sports Foundation, and Safari Club International used donations to influence candidates for office. The NRA’s political action committee spent $12.2 million on a get-out-the-vote effort with Chuck Norris called “Trigger the Vote” and many pro-gun candidates took quite radical positions (Beckel 2010). Stephen Broden, running in Texas for the U.S. House of Representatives, argued that violent revolution should be “on the table” if the GOP lost the midterm elections (Allen 2010; Mason 2010; Wing 2010). Earlier in the year, Sharron Angle,

candidate for the Senate in Nevada, called for “Second Amendment remedies” to block health care reform and added that “the first thing we need to do is take Harry Reid out” (Damon and Schwartz 2010; Kleefield 2010; Stein 2010). Sarah Palin, former Vice-Presidential candidate, told her supporters not to “retreat” but “reload” in the wake of losses in 2008 (Blake 2010). Her political action committee published a map featuring 20 congressional districts with “crosshairs” on them, telling supporters to “target” the Democrats in those districts who voted for health care reform (Chen 2011; Klein 2013, 291; Sorial 2010, 1). One of those districts was the 8th district in Arizona, home to Gabrielle Giffords.

The midterm contest between incumbent congresswoman Gabrielle Giffords and her opponent, Tea Party Republican Jesse Kelly was a microcosm of the discourse at the national level. Kelly held events with gun rights extremists throughout the midterm campaign, including a fundraiser that encouraged supporters to “shoot a fully automatic M16” with the candidate (Kelly and Bodfield 2010). The NRA spent $38,950 on advertising supporting Kelly during the race (Beckel 2011). Giffords was twice threatened with violence during the campaign and a “handful of irritated conservatives” followed her “almost everywhere” during the 2009 debate over health care reform (Collins 2009, A27). An unknown assailant shot her door with a firearm and a protester carrying a gun dropped it on the floor during an event with the congresswoman (*Arizona Daily Star* 2009). The sight of firearms at political rallies became commonplace in 2009, reflecting an “uptick in the radical right” (Rich 2009). Some observers labelled the cooperation between anti-government Tea Partiers and radical pro-gun activists as “insurrectionist” and argued that growing prevalence of protesters carrying firearms to protests threatened to undo democratic norms against nonviolence (Educational Fund to Stop Gun Violence 2013). The use of language that invoked violent resistance or the use of firearms as a

solution to political differences did not originate with the election of Barack Obama, but the two-year period after his victory was an important inflection point in public discourse around and about gun violence.

Violent imagery permeated the discourse of the 2010 midterm elections as well. Research shows that "violent metaphors" and imagery can "multiply support for political violence" in citizens' minds (Kalmoe 2014, 546). Language evoking violence in political discourse dramatically increases the prevalence of "aggressive citizens," encouraging "troubling orientations toward violence" (ibid). Insular and balkanized news media created echo chambers in which violent language was fed back into the public consciousness. One study found that "uncivil" language in media, "specifically pundit-themed cable news and talk radio" increased citizens' willingness to accept incivility and violence in politics (Gervais 2014, 565). One notable example of this tense and vitriolic political atmosphere was a speech posted by Sarah Palin on her Facebook page the morning Obama was due to speak in Tucson (Sorial 2012). In it, she defended the language and violent imagery used during the midterm elections, denied any influence on Giffords' shooter, and defended her right to use incendiary speech (Engels 2015, 110-1). Palin's video represented many of the elements of "polarized, divisive, and unproductive" discourse that surrounded the midterm elections and the Tucson shooting (Hogan and Rood 2015, 361).

Divisiveness in American politics directly influenced Arizona's political and civic health. Community divisions defined the civic landscape in the state in 2011. Retirees and migrants from Central and South America found homes in Arizona in the early 21st century, transforming the state's demographics and subsequently, its politics (Zoellner 2012). Gallup found that only one in ten residents of Arizona thought their elected officials did a "very good" job (Center for

the Future of Arizona 2009). The same proportion felt that people in their community cared about each other (ibid). The data shows that even small "community building activities" like neighborhood associations or local business organizations were largely absent from Arizonans' daily lives (Zoellner 2012). The 2008 housing crisis exacerbated these trends significantly (Story 2012). Increasingly acrimonious and vitriolic political talk began to appear as the social and community bonds weakened. When groups used violent metaphors, or argued that political violence was normal, it lowered citizens' threshold for accepting that violence as a solution to disagreement (Kalmoe 2014). Rising partisanship and fragmentation of the media landscape also helped to lower barriers to violent political language. Therefore, violent rhetoric and entrenched pro-gun attitudes threatened to place the debate over sensible policies outside the realm of the politically possible. Yet, President Obama delivered a speech to the people of Tucson and attempted to overcome strategic and political barriers to gun control by laying the groundwork for a public debate about one of the most contentious issues in American politics.

The national eulogy as balm for national trauma

In this section, I outline the characteristics of the *national eulogy* and describe the appropriate conditions for delivering such a speech to the nation. First, I define national trauma and show how it creates situations where a national eulogy is appropriate. Second, I define the national eulogy and review its two primary functions. Third, I lay out the national eulogy's formal characteristics, the elements that differentiate it from a traditional eulogy and establish its relevance as a distinct type of presidential discourse. Finally, I conclude with an explanation of how the formal characteristics of national eulogy are essential to fulfilling its functions. In this section, I argue that the national eulogy represents a modern presidential response to national trauma, and its use to speak to a community suffering from mass shootings is strategically appropriate. In the next section, I examine the use of the national eulogy in Tucson, analyze the

effectiveness of Obama's enactment of the national eulogy, and identify the impact of his speech on the debate over gun control.

Local traumatic events become national trauma when they circulate through national communication infrastructures and social networks. In the era of mass media and viral networking, stories of the tragedy disseminate throughout the nation within minutes. Neal (1998) defined *national trauma* as an event that is "shared collectively" by the nation and expressed itself through national "sadness, fear, and anger" (4). When "similar emotions are expressed by others" and the stories and retellings of the event "played and replayed in consciousness" of the entire nation, the local trauma is disseminated throughout the citizenry (ibid, 5). People suffer from distress and their lives are "temporarily put on hold and replaced by the darkest of fears and anxieties" (ibid). During a national trauma, fear and anxiety threaten to undermine the most deeply held values and beliefs in the society. A nation becomes "permanently changed" after a national trauma; the event transforms its citizens and institutions in the crucible of crisis (ibid). Despite these ruptures, uncertainty can have "liberating effects on a social system," the status quo can be challenged, and "opportunities for change" can become available (ibid, 18). Traumatic events caused by the failure of social and political institutions can "generate a need for new forms of public policy initiatives" and inspire the government or citizenry to act (ibid). A national trauma can divide citizens and pit them against one another. People look to their national leaders to make sense of the senseless, explain the inexplicable, and speak the unspeakable.

Campbell and Jamieson (2008) identified the *national* eulogy as one way that presidents make sense of catastrophe for a people and their nation. They defined a national eulogy as a speech where the president "assumes a priestly role to make sense of a catastrophe and transform

it from evidence of destruction into a symbol of national resilience" (ibid, 73). They identified two functions of the national eulogy, one symbolic, the other political. Primarily, a national eulogy resolves the symbolic rupture created in a moment of national trauma. By "unifying the country around the leadership of the speaker" the president can join the fragmented polity in a project of symbolic repair (ibid, 78). Campbell and Jamieson found the immediate priority of the president in the aftermath of a national crisis is to ensure that the people survive the tragedy with national identity intact. Fulfilling this task requires providing comfort to a people in a time of trauma.

Campbell and Jamieson (2008) also found that the president builds rhetorical and political capital fulfilling the speech's primary functions. Because citizens are left vulnerable and uncertain after a catastrophe, "the capacity of this genre to build rhetorical capital for a president is great" (78). They argued that a president able to bring together a wounded and fractured nation engenders goodwill with citizens. Campbell and Jamieson argued that found in national eulogies often contain warrants and evidence for arguments in a public debate. Presidents drew on the national eulogy to "construct premises for other claims in dissimilar genres" (ibid, 79). Rood (2017) called this use of the eulogy to create opportunities for argument, the "warrant of the dead" in the context of mass shootings (48). He identified several presidential addresses where "the dead" generate premises for arguments in public policy debates like gun control (ibid). The president should not use the national eulogy to press for reform in the moment, but successfully enacted, the genre offers resources for future public policy debates.

Campbell and Jamieson (2008) outlined five formal characteristics of the national eulogy that helps the speaker fulfill the two functions. First, the president must enact a traditional eulogy. To do so, a speaker must acknowledge the deaths in a somber way, recast the

relationship of the community to the deceased, assure them that the dead live on, and guide them out of their grief toward catharsis and healing (Campbell and Jamieson 1978, 18). They found that the traditional eulogistic form allowed speakers to heal the immediate community and provide a salve for the psychic wounds they received. Campbell and Jamieson (2008) argued that any leader wishing to heal the nation must begin by healing those citizens most directly impacted by the trauma.

Second, presidents conducting national eulogies recognized the victims of the tragedy as exemplars of American citizenship (ibid). Speakers told of how the victims and survivors of the catastrophe were integral to the story of the nation. Presidents appealed to the nation to "reaffirm the values" of the victims and survivors and connected citizens together with national symbols (ibid, 79). Presidents wove stories together that placed victims into a larger narrative of the nation's history and future. This helped the people to "come to terms with calamity, evil or terrorism and to see these events in a larger, ongoing national perspective…by addressing such questions as why the tragedy happened and what meaning it has for the nation" (ibid, 80). Successful enactment of the second formal element contextualizes national trauma by situating the event within key value structures of the nation's citizens.

Third, presidents transformed national trauma into symbols of "national resilience" (ibid, 73). Survivors became evidence of the nation's strength, and metaphors of rebirth and survival were employed to symbolically transform the "wounded polity into a resilient nation" (ibid, 75). Presidents represented images of the living and dead as "symbols of resurrection and renewal" for the nation and cast their strength and heroism as the strength and heroism of the nation (ibid, 80). Presidents cast the dead as "symbols for the institutions or ideals" they represented, and depicted the survival of those institutions or ideas as empirical evidence of the nation's resilience

(ibid, 85). In the third formal characteristic of the national eulogy, presidents took stories and symbols of the trauma and used them to reference national stories and symbols of resilience and survival.

Fourth, presidents ensured the people that "the tragedy will not be repeated" and appealed to the nation for some action or value change to prevent future recurrences (ibid, 80). Presidents rebuilt confidence in leaders and institutions; they assured people that changes to policies or values will "prevent a recurrence of the catastrophe" (ibid, 87). Presidents facing significant constraints in a specific policy area often called for a shift in civic values instead of policy change. Fifth, presidents conducting national eulogies adopted a priestly role to avoid the perception of partisanship. People saw presidents "tainted by self-interest" as disingenuous and attempts to "unify and comfort" failed (ibid, 80). A priestly role conferred spiritual authority on presidents, allowing them to speak on behalf of the nation. National unity depended on a communal understanding of values and principles that drive the project of the nation forward and a president failing to adopt the role of national priest cannot claim to speak on behalf of the citizens of that nation.

Presidents who successfully enacted the national eulogy used all five of these elements and unified the nation in its recovery from trauma. Often, they used resulting goodwill to promote policies and values that could prevent another national trauma. Using the traditional eulogy as model for their speeches, president guided the citizenry towards an understanding of the trauma. They cast victims and survivors as key figures in a national story and placed the catastrophe within an historical context. When successful, presidents unified the nation in their understanding of the trauma and then argued for changes to civic values or national policy. Frequently, nations suffer a trauma that generates a moment of transformative possibility. In that

situation, a leader can use the national eulogy to construct persuasive arguments for political, social, or cultural change. In the following analysis, I argue that President Obama successfully enacted the form of national eulogy but failed to unify the nation. Tucson represents a case where the speech failed to function in the way predicted by rhetorical scholars. Obama could not generate capital for reform in the wake of Tucson. In the conclusion, I advance an explanation of the speech that accounts for the discrepancy between successful enactment and failed purpose.

Obama's Eulogy in Tucson, Arizona

Tucson undoubtedly traumatized the nation. National news broadcasts, newspapers around the world, and leaders from both political parties spoke extensively on the shooting. The Sheriff of Pima County, Arizona, where the shooting took place, focused on flaws in our national character as a problem: "The anger, the hatred, the bigotry that goes on in this country is getting to be outrageous" (Murray and Horowitz 2011). A Congresswoman and a federal judge were attacked during a meeting with constituents. People and places who symbolized our democratic institutions and their origins in town squares and meeting halls were attacked. I argue that in response, President Obama presented a successful national eulogy. Not only will this analysis outline how Tucson represents a successful enactment of the national eulogy, but I also contend that the successful functioning of the speech was undermined by polarization. I argue that Tucson represented the moment when national discord on gun control overwhelmed the ability for the president to speak to the nation as one. To make this argument, I will apply the five defining formal characteristics of a national eulogy to Obama's speech in Tucson and then describe their failure to function due to the contextual limitations of the moment.

First, Obama conducted a traditional eulogy for those people who died that morning. He began the speech by acknowledging the deaths in a somber way:

> To the families of those we've lost; to all who called them friends; to the students of this university, the public servants who are gathered here, the people of Tucson and the people of Arizona: I have come here tonight as an American who, like all Americans, kneels to pray with you today and will stand by you tomorrow…The hopes of a nation are here tonight. We mourn with you for the fallen. We join you in your grief…Scripture tells us: There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells. God is within her, she will not fall; God will help her at break of day. (Obama 2011, para 2-3)

The president directly addressed the family of the victims and then quoted from Psalm 46 at the outset of the speech. His tone was deliberate and the delivery steady throughout the speech. The president used a solemn tone to present a sense of measured respect for the victims and survivors of the shooting and acknowledged the tragedy immediately. Themes drawn from scripture situate the event within a religious context, but also a larger political frame. The "city" represented a city that was both protected and inhabited by God. The city "will not fall" despite being under siege. Obama established a central theme that will occur throughout the rest of the speech, survival under distress.

Second, Obama presented stories of each victim, providing insight to their character, and casting them as exemplars of American exceptionalism. The first story combined themes of politics and hard-work, fairness and dedication:

> Judge John Roll served our legal system for nearly 40 years. A graduate of this university and a graduate of this law school -- -- Judge Roll was recommended for the federal bench by John McCain 20 years ago -- -- appointed by President George H.W. Bush and rose to become Arizona's chief federal judge. His colleagues described him as the hardest-

> working judge within the Ninth Circuit. He was on his way back from attending Mass, as he did every day, when he decided to stop by and say hi to his representative. (para 7-8)

The story focused on the judge's character and closed with a focus on his commitment to his faith and democracy. He repeated the pattern five more times in describing the other victims. Each story was individualized, detailed enough to give a sense of the person, highlighted their life's work and character, and reminded the community that they are survived by people who loved them. Obama acknowledged each of the deaths in a somber way that recalled memories of the dead for those who knew them and provided windows into their lives for those unfamiliar with the victims. The president offered eulogies-in-miniature for each of the victims, establishing them as models of civic virtue.

The president also framed the shooting as an attack on national principles. He spoke about the Congress on your Corner meeting as "quintessentially American," and focused on the process of democratic engagement with the citizenry and its role in our nation's continued functioning. He described the event as one that fulfills "a central tenet of the democracy envisioned by our founders," one in which the "representatives of the people answering questions to their constituents," so that they could "carry their concerns back to our nation's capital" (para 5-6). Obama described the shooting as an attack on the fundamental civic practice of democratic engagement. He also spoke about the tone of our political discourse as a threat to national identity. At a time "when our discourse has become so sharply polarized," he said, "it's important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we're talking with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds" (para 24-5). Obama described the concern echoed in the media and public square about the vitriol infecting our political talk but argued that this damage is reparable.

The president also reaffirmed national values as consistent with the values of the victims. President Obama offered an extended reflection in the conclusion about the youngest victim, Christina Taylor Green and what her life reveals about the idea of patriotism. He concluded the speech by asking America to:

> imagine for a moment, here was a young girl who was just becoming aware of our democracy; just beginning to understand the obligations of citizenship; just starting to glimpse the fact that some day she, too, might play a part in shaping her nation's future. She had been elected to her student council. She saw public service as something exciting and hopeful. She was off to meet her congresswoman, someone she was sure was good and important and might be a role model. She saw all this through the eyes of a child, undimmed by the cynicism or vitriol that we adults all too often just take for granted. I want to live up to her expectations. I want our democracy to be as good as Christina imagined it. I want America to be as good as she imagined it. …Christina was given to us on September 11th, 2001, one of 50 babies born that day to be pictured in a book called "Faces of Hope." On either side of her photo in that book were simple wishes for a child's life. "I hope you help those in need," read one. "I hope you know all the words to the National Anthem and sing it with your hand over your heart." "I hope you jump in rain puddles." If there are rain puddles in Heaven, Christina is jumping in them today. And here on this Earth -- here on this Earth, we place our hands over our hearts, and we commit ourselves as Americans to forging a country that is forever worthy of her gentle, happy spirit. (para 42-46)

Here the president connected Christina to the values of *democracy, citizenship,* and *innocence* by focusing on the young girl's early interest in politics. The president established a connection

between Christina and the nation and made appeals to the nation that emphasized principles of kindness and civic engagement. The community, and subsequently, the nation survives by embracing the values represented by Christina. Paralleled with the "City of God" discourse in the introduction of the speech, the story of Christina completed the movement of the speech back into the kingdom of God, returning the listener to heaven on their symbolic journey, assuring them that God protects the nation, and Christina's life is evidence of that.

Third, the president used the speech to reaffirm national resilience. In the middle section of the speech, he used antithesis and repetition to enact national resilience. "Our hearts are broken by their sudden passing," he said, reminding the nation of the somber moment and guiding them to confront the deaths. He transformed the sense of brokenness into fullness in the next phrase with antithesis— "Our hearts are broken – and yet, our hearts have reason for fullness. Our hearts are full of hope and thanks for the 13 Americans who survived the shooting, including the congresswoman" (para 16-17). This juxtaposition invited citizens to be certain that the dead will survive in our memory. Those who survived the shooting are evidence of this. In the next two paragraphs, the president used repetition to drive home the point that there are reasons to be joyous, even in sorrow (para 18-19). He said, "Gabby opened her eyes for the first time…Gabby opened her eyes, so I can tell you she knows we are here. She knows we love her. And she knows we are rooting for her" (para 18-19). The survival and recovery of the congresswoman represented the repairing of national wounds. The stories of Daniel Hernandez (para 20-21) and Patricia Maisch (para 22-23) were also examples for the nation's resilience. Both were instrumental in saving lives during the shooting. Obama told America "that heroism does not require special training or physical strength. Heroism is here, in the hearts of so many of our fellow citizens, all around us, just waiting to be summoned" (para 23). Obama called upon

the nation to honor the lives of the dead through acts of everyday heroism, and continue the legacy of those who died, ensuring they live on in the deeds of the people.

Obama also used three other strategies to affirm the survival of the national community, offering citizens the knowledge that the nation will endure the trauma. The president called upon the people to use the tragedy to "look forward; to reflect on the present and the future," to "recognize our own mortality," and be "reminded that in the fleeting time we have…what matters is…how well we have loved—and what small part we have played in making the lives of other people better" (para 30-33). He appealed to the listener's empathy, the value of love, and altruism. He reminded the people of their own mortality and added that by carrying on the work of the deceased the people can help them to live on in the memories and deeds of the nation. Obama used the image of the family as another strategy to affirm the survival of the community. He said we should "sense the abiding love that we have for our own husbands, our own wives, our own life partners…our mom or our grandma…our brother or son" when we think of the Tucson victims (para 34-37). Appealing to the community as family encouraged citizens to treat each other as they would a brother or sister. Obama also made appeals to American pride and challenged citizens to make those who died proud (para 38). He said that we must learn to act in accordance with community-oriented values and "widen our circle of concern so that we bequeath the American Dream to future generations" if we are to live up to the examples set by John Roll and the other victims.

Fourth, President Obama defined the crisis as an opportunity to change our national values to prevent future tragedy. The president juxtaposed the stories of survivors with those of the victims to show that change to create a better nation is possible. When Obama described the recovery of Giffords (para 18-19) and the actions of Daniel Hernandez and Patricia Maisch (para

20-22), their stories of heroism were models for virtuous citizenship in a time of crisis. He stated this directly, “These men and women remind us that heroism is found not only on the fields of battle,” and adds that, “Heroism is here, in the hearts of so many of our fellow citizens, all around us, just waiting to be summoned” (para 23). Obama emphasized that people can carry on the work of those who died by upholding the values represented by the dead and those who survived. Individuals must try to live up to the values of “our own husbands, our own wives, our own life partners,” “our mom or our grandma,” “our brother or son,” “a man who prized his family and doing his job well” (para 34). Through identification with those who died, the citizen can understand their role as a member of the community. Obama assured the people that a better nation can be created by continuing the legacy of those who died. “Those who died here, those who saved life here,” he says, “they help me believe…that for all our imperfections, we are full of decency and goodness, and that the forces that divide us are not as strong as those that unite us” (para 40-41). By living up to the legacy of the victims, citizens can confront the trauma and heal the nation.

President Obama responded to the crisis of polarization by calling for a reinvigoration of the idea of the community. He focused on communal features of the American Dream throughout the speech. The fidelity of Judge Roll, the retirement dreams of the Morris’, the volunteerism of Phyllis Schneck, the selflessness of the Stoddard’s, the altruism of Gabe Zimmerman, the innocence and optimism of Christina Taylor Green – these all represented different facets of the communitarian values that uphold and sustain our towns and cities, and as a result, the fabric of national civic society. Mass shootings and random violence cut lives short, undermine empathy, and increase the polarization in our society. Obama expressed the fear that if hate and vitriol drive the national discussion, then the American Dream might be lost to future

generations. He said that “The loss of these wonderful people should make every one of us strive to be better,” arguing that if we are “better in our private lives” or are “better friends and neighbors and coworkers and parents,” those behaviors will influence others to act the same way, improving the lives of those around us and strengthening communities (para 37). Obama said treating one another more humanely and with more empathy are prerequisites to having “more civility in our public discourse,” and in turn this civility “can help us face up to the challenges of our nation” in ways that would make those who died proud (para 38). We “are all Americans,” he said, “we can question each other’s ideas without questioning each other’s love of country,” and through combined efforts “constantly widen the circle of our concern,” and successfully “bequeath the American Dream to future generations” (para 39). Obama posited that civil discourse is the foundation of democratic citizenship and this is fundamental in ensuring continued access to the American Dream for future generations. He told America that polarization must be confronted before citizens can successfully reform policies and fix the crises that face the nation.

Fifth, Obama adopted a priestly role during the speech, speaking throughout in a somber tone, in terms of ethics, empathy, and emotion, and directly to the American people. Obama used biblical quotations and allusions to frame the central messages of the speech. He quoted Psalm 46 which emphasized themes of God’s omnipotence, divine justice, the river of life, the city of God in heaven, war, peace, and violence (para 4). He also quoted the book of Job, “‘When I looked for light, then came darkness,’” and added, “Bad things happen, and we have to guard against simple explanations in the aftermath” (para 26). The president used scripture to frame the larger themes of the speech.

President Obama clearly attempted to use the speech to build rhetorical capital with the American people. Given his graceful enactment of the form of a national eulogy, it is unsurprising that polling data after the shooting showed increased support for reform (*Huffington Post* 2011). Coverage of the president's speech was extremely positive. It was called his "finest hour" and was praised by members of both political parties (Marlowe 2011; Willis 2011). Local, national, and international press also praised the president for rising above the partisan rancor (*Al Jazeera* 2011; Cooper and Zeleny 2011; Littwin 2011; MacAskill 2011; Nagourney 2011; Orwin 2011). The speech also drew praise from communications and rhetoric scholars. Brian Amsden (2014) pointed out that the "call for civility" resonated with audiences and should be considered impactful despite the lack of progress on policy reform (457). Francesca Smith and Thomas Hollihan (2014) commended the speech for avoiding the "trap of partisanship" that many politicians fall prey to when responding to national crises (604). Ian Reifowitz (2012) argued that the speech presents a vision that is consistent with Obama's fundamental "conception of American national identity" (133). However, none of the critics address directly the question of the speech's paradoxical nature. All the data points toward a successful speech, yet the speech did not shift the long-term fight for gun safety regulations.

In Tucson, the president offered the American people a vision of a revitalized public square. The shooting disrupted a public meeting between Congresswoman Giffords and her constituents. The meeting represented a microcosm of the larger public square, what Mill called the free marketplace of ideas and Habermas called the bourgeois public sphere (Mill 1859; Habermas 1991). President Obama used the Tucson speech to speak about the polarization of politics in America, the vitriolic and damaging language used on both sides, and possible ways to change our talk so that the citizenry could confront national issues. A revitalized public square

would reduce the “sharply polarized” discourse of our politics and make citizens less “eager to lay the blame for all that ails the world at the feet of those who happen to think differently,” and therefore make it possible to solve real problems like gun violence (Obama 2011, para 25). The president said that it is “important for us to pause for a moment and make sure that we’re talking with each other in a way that heals.” (para 25) He added that a revitalized public square must begin with “a good dose of humility” and not with “pointing fingers or assigning blame.” (para 28) Americans must “expand our moral imagination,” “listen to each other more carefully,” and “sharpen our instincts for empathy and remind ourselves of all the ways that our hopes and dreams are bound together.” (para 28) The public square that President Obama hoped to revitalize was compared to a family or a church or a community where everyone knows their neighbor and treats them with kindness. The president believed that the public square as the site for conversations about policy reform, must be repaired before deliberations about reform of gun laws or any other reform measures could occur. Despite his successful enactment of the form of a national eulogy, his efforts to reform our public discourse clearly failed.

Conclusion

In Tucson, President Obama enacted a successful and touching national eulogy. He fulfilled the characteristics of a national eulogy to transform symbols of destruction and trauma into signs of national strength and resilience. He did so with surpassing grace. The goal of the Tucson speech was to create the preconditions for reform, so that policy changes might be possible sometime in the future. In this, he clearly failed. In the end, a small group of highly partisan interest groups blocked reform. Fringe groups circulated extreme counter-narratives and accused the president of tyrannical actions on gun reform. Despite the lack of empirical data for these claims, extremist patriot and Tea Party groups fed rumors that the president was planning on confiscating firearms nationwide (Neiwert 2010). The leader of Gun Owners of America said

"They want our guns, of course — that's what every socialist regime has ever wanted to do. They want our kids, they want our money, they want our land" (ibid). Bolstered by Tea Party ideologues, Republican lawmakers openly challenged the president and threatened confrontation on a range of upcoming issues (Baker 2010). Obama called for a reformed public square in Tucson, one in which the respect for other citizens and their points of view forms the basis of our dialogue. In this vision of American democracy, community and good reasons are central values that uphold our civic society. These efforts to change our public discourse clearly failed.

The preceding analysis suggests that contextual barriers as stringent as those on the issue of gun safety reform can undermine the effectiveness of a well-crafted national eulogy. It seems clear that the national eulogy no longer functions on issues that activate extreme partisanship. In the face of intransigent opposition, the national eulogy cannot provide the nation with grounds for unity. Campbell and Jamieson identified three situations that may prevent national eulogies from functioning properly—if the nation does not accept the president as national priest or the president fails to enact this role, if the eulogy is mistimed or prior events contradict the message, or the "lines of argument developed earlier…affected public response to the president's discourse" (Campbell and Jamieson 2010, 101). Tucson is an instance where the lines of argument circulating in the public discourse prior to the tragedy undermined the rhetorical functioning of the speech. These lines of argument were developed and disseminated by extremist and fringe partisans whose priorities were not public safety, but electoral victory. President Obama used the genre of a national eulogy to develop a thorough and persuasive argument for the revitalization of the public square in Tucson, but this vision was insufficient to move the public given the divisive political situation.

Newtown – Public horror, deliberative eulogy, and institutional dysfunction

While guns and gun control have been a subject of debate among politicians and lawyers and lobbyists and pollsters and political groups in the center and on the fringes, our children have been living in a free-fire zone for sociopaths with virtually unfettered access to instruments of mass murder.

- *The New York Times*, January 16, 2013

On the morning of December 14, 2012, Adam Lanza murdered his mother in their home, took a semi-automatic assault rifle to the school where she worked and shot and killed 20 children and 6 school employees before taking his own life. It was the largest school shooting in American history to date. National media outlets labeled the shooting "unspeakable" (Peyser 2012), "unthinkable" (Soltis and Sauchelli 2012), "devastating" (Pilkington 2012), "inexplicable" (Hall 2012) and a "horror beyond words" (*Washington Post* 2012). For the residents of Newtown, the shooting "smashed their once-idealized view of their bucolic town," and changed a community forever (Soltis and Sauchelli). The Connecticut Department of Justice found "no clear indication why" Lanza decided to walk into Sandy Hook Elementary School that morning, "despite the collection of extensive background information" on him "through a multitude of interviews and other sources" (Sedensky 2013). The tragedy led to immediate calls for stricter gun safety regulations.

National media called on the nation to act immediately. Gail Collins (2012) summed up the feeling of many around the nation in her column the next day:

> When a gunman takes out kindergartners in a bucolic Connecticut suburb, three days after a gunman shot up a mall in Oregon, in the same year as fatal mass shootings in Minneapolis, in Tulsa, in a Sikh temple in Wisconsin, in a theater in Colorado, a coffee bar in Seattle and a college in California – then we're doing this to ourselves. (A23)

She continued by arguing that we need to "tackle gun violence because we need to redefine who we are," adding, "we have to make ourselves better" (A23). Collins framed the gun debate as a matter of national identity, a failure to act would be a failure of American character. *The Washington Post* (2012) blamed "political cowardice" as the primary barrier to "sensible legislation" on firearms. *The New York Times* (2012) chastised Democrats who supported "any one of a half-dozen other sensible ideas" but "live in fear of the gun lobby" and refused to act (A22). Legislation aimed at reducing gun violence would not pass, they argued, "unless Mr. Obama and Congressional leaders show the courage to make it happen" (A22). *The Denver Post* (2012) asked, "How is it exploiting tragedy to suggest that outlawing high-capacity magazines might save some lives? It's the truth" (29A). Major news outlets called for reform after Newtown, clearly articulating a desire for change to our gun safety laws.

Leading politicians around the country also spoke publicly and vociferously in favor of action, and many called upon President Barack Obama to act. "The NRA and the gun lobby are not supportive of the President and now is the time for him to give them a real reason," said California Lt. Governor Gavin Newsom (*San Bernardino Sun* 2012). He demanded the president "Put the gun lobby on the bench," and challenged him to "call on every member of congress to step out from behind the money and power of the gun lobby and act before we are lulled back into a false sense of security and forget to have the conversation again" (ibid). Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York said, "We need immediate action," and then added, "We have heard all

the rhetoric before. What we have not seen is leadership, not from the White House, and not from Congress. That must end today. This is a national tragedy and it demands a national response" (MacAskill 2012). Governor Andrew Cuomo (2012) of New York pledged his "full support" for "aggressive action" on gun control. Not only did national media argue publicly for reform, but influential members of the presidents' own party demanded he lead the nation towards new gun safety regulations.

Organizations and interest groups also put public pressure on the administration to act. The American Federation of Teachers (2012) argued that "Everything we can do, we must do, including a renewed focus on gun control" to make sure that "our children, educators, and school employees go to school believing it is a safe sanctuary." Mark Kelly, husband of Tucson victim Gabby Giffords and founder of Americans for Responsible Solutions, called for political leaders to "stand up and do what is right" (Jennings 2012). Leadership, he said, involves "more than regret, sorrow, and condolence," adding that, "victims of gun violence deserve leaders who have the courage to participate in meaningful discussion about our gun laws and how they can be reformed and better enforced" (ibid). The Co-chairs of Mayors Against Illegal Guns and the president of the Brady Campaign both chastised the administration for delaying even one more day new reforms (MacAskill 2012). American citizens also demanded immediate action. One petition calling for immediate reform was signed by more than 43 thousand Americans in the 24 hours after it was posted to the White House's website (*Businessline* 2012). Leading Democrats, key interest groups, organizations, and everyday Americans all signaled to the Obama administration that words were insufficient; action was required.

Some leaders offered regret, sorrow, and condolences—but little else. Senator Joe Liebermann (2012) said that he would do all he could to "assist the victims, survivors, and their

loved ones" and gave his "deepest sympathies to everyone affected." Republican Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (2012) said that he wanted "everyone to lift their hearts in prayer" and "unite around the hope that there will soon come a day when parents no longer fear this kind of violence." Georgia Senator Saxby Chambliss (2012) expressed his "deepest sympathy," and said there were "no words" to describe his grief at the senseless loss of life." Louie Gohmert (2012) also had "no words to describe the sheer horror and unbearable pain" that he felt and offered "thoughts and fervent prayers" to "lift up those suffering." In stark contrast to previous shootings, the National Rifle Association was notably silent the weekend after the shooting (Raasch and Johnson 2012). In the aftermath of the shooting, there seemed to be an opening for reform.

Shortly after the shooting occurred, President Obama cancelled a speech in Maine about the budget, and instead held a televised press conference at the White House (Long 2012). A clearly stricken president gave heartfelt condolences and vowed to act:

> We're going to have to come together and take meaningful action to prevent more tragedies like this, regardless of the politics. This evening, Michelle and I will do what I know every parent in America will do, which is hug our children a little tighter and we'll tell them that we love them, and we'll remind each other how deeply we love one another. But there are families in Connecticut who cannot do that tonight. And they need all of us right now. In the hard days to come, that community needs us to be at our best as Americans. And I will do everything in my power as President to help. (Obama 2012c, para 5-6)

Clearly, the president had decided to push for reform. He reflected on the nation's grief in the moment but stated that he would use all his influence to help prevent future mass shootings.

Every citizen is affected by gun violence and this obliges each American to act, including the president himself. Obama clearly enacted the leadership that others had called upon him to display after the shooting. He displayed emotion, but more importantly, showed resolve and determination to key decisionmakers and media outlets watching the press conference.

In what follows, I examine Obama's Newtown eulogy and argue that it represents the first time President Obama explicitly pushed for gun safety reform at the national level. He signaled a willingness to advocate reform in the press conference on December 14 to the news media. The Newtown eulogy, however, offered the president an opportunity to speak to the entire nation following the tragedy. The situation facing the president is summed up best by a study released in 2013 by several trauma specialists:

> We have described six hallmarks of the Sandy Hook shooting massacre that coalesced into a riveting story and a call for action. The event was random and extreme. Americans identified closely with Newtown. A sitting President made this rampage shooting his personal mission. Powerful psychological reactions spread nationwide. The mass media "framing" brought unrelenting focus to this episode. Social media messaging reverberated throughout the digital sphere, keeping individuals engaged in multi-way conversation. Collectively, these elements created a "tipping point" moment. (Schultz et al. 2013, 71)

In fact, while the forces seemed aligned at a "tipping point," this did not occur. The president and his administration pursued an aggressive gun control agenda following the shooting but failed to achieve any legislative victories at the national level. The Newtown eulogy offers scholars a crucial case study in the deliberative eulogy and a turning point in the gun debate in American politics in the 21st century. In the next section, I outline the formal characteristics of a

deliberative eulogy and argue that the speech revised the form in several ways to fit the unique situation facing the president. In the analysis, I argue that Obama enacted this revised deliberative eulogy in Newtown, but that institutional failures overwhelmed a timely and well-executed push for reform. The eulogy marked a turning point in firearms safety politics in America and was a touchstone of President Obama's extensive discourse on mass shootings.

The deliberative eulogy as recurrent hybrid form

President Obama faced a complex situation following the shooting in Newtown. Unlike the situation after the Tucson shooting, key leaders and organizations were more direct in demanding leadership from the president. Additionally, the president had just won reelection and was less constrained by electoral considerations than before. Given the changing constraints and increased demands for action, President Obama needed to center deliberative calls for action within his eulogy for the victims of the shooting. To make this argument, I first define the formal characteristics of a speech that enacts a fusion of the eulogy with deliberative calls to action. Second, I argue that the constraints facing President Obama in Newtown were different from previous situations. Third, I outline a revised form of the deliberative eulogy hybrid form. In the next section, I show how the president enacted this revised form of deliberative eulogy and argue that this choice was appropriate given the situation, but still failed to produce reform.

In some circumstances, speakers may use a *rhetorical hybrid* in response to complex situations. Jamieson and Campbell (1982) observed that multifaceted situational constraints may induce rhetors to use "elements of forensic, epideictic, and deliberative genres" in ways that "overlap and combine in practice" (146-7). Hybrid forms emerge in response to unfamiliar and intricate situations and are useful to rhetors only insofar as these conditions hold. Mary Stuckey (2015) demonstrated that these blended hybrid genres have always been a central feature of "our national political language" and examined their use throughout history (xx-xxi). Reagan, for

example, used elements of a traditional eulogy with specific deliberative appeals to address the political and social impact of the Challenger disaster (Mister 1986). Lyndon Johnson blended forensic, epideictic, and deliberative modes of rhetoric in his eulogy for President Kennedy (Jamieson and Campbell 1982). Presidents Bush and Clinton blended epideictic and deliberative in their responses to terrorist attacks (Dennis and Kunkel 2004). President Lincoln embedded arguments about nationalism within the Gettysburg Address, fulfilling the speeches epideictic obligations while including deliberative structures that made a case for the United States as an exceptional nation (Zarefsky 2015). It is apparent that presidents have used hybrid rhetorical forms to meet the complex, and often conflicting, demands facing the American executive.

One type of rhetorical hybrid fuses deliberative appeals within a traditional eulogy. This recurring hybrid takes traditional eulogistic form and integrates deliberative elements into the framework of the eulogy, typically in the service of some agenda. It combines epideictic with argumentative, praise with politics. Situations that generate the need for eulogizing and policy making can be complex. Jamieson and Campbell (1982) identified three constraints these situations generate. First, policies advocated by the eulogist must be consistent with the values of the deceased. Second, demands for action following the deaths produce an inducement to speak about policy. Third, the calls for action in the speech cannot seem divisive to an audience or to the community. A eulogy integrating deliberative appeals often fulfills sometimes contradictory functions. The speech must reknit the community and "immortalize the deceased" while offering policies that respond to the calls for action from the community (ibid, 148). A successful hybridization combining deliberative and eulogistic elements requires the speaker navigate these constraints.

Jamieson and Campbell (1982) outlined four formal characteristics of this recurrent hybrid between deliberative and eulogistic modes of discourse. First, the deliberative appeals are subordinate to the eulogistic elements of the speech. This arrangement foregrounds the need to reknit the community and takes precedence to the demands for action constraining the speaker. Hence, the need to eulogize takes precedence. Second, the deliberative appeals must be framed as a memorial to the deceased. Arguments for policy reform embedded within eulogies are more likely to persuade when the policies represent the same goals and values that the dead advocated. Successful hybridizations in these circumstances should frame appeals for deliberative change within the larger values and beliefs represented by the deceased.

Third, appeals to action must be genuine and congruent with previous policies advocated by the speaker (ibid, 149). Should the eulogist propose policies inconsistent with their character or history, appeals to action will not resonate with audiences. Fourth, any proposed policies or arguments cannot seem divisive. Should policies prove divisive or controversial, the reaction to the deliberative appeals could undermine the traditional functions of the eulogy. Since the primary purpose of the speech is to reknit the community, advocating for positions that fuel division does not fulfill the functions of the speech. The formal characteristics are situationally bounded and "transitory," fading from use when the constraints that shaped them dissipate (ibid, 150). Future speakers, facing different constraints, may alter the combination to address the situation more effectively. Such was the case after Newtown.

Public demands for action formed the dominant contextual element facing the president after Newtown. The shooting traumatized the nation and angered politicians, public intellectuals, media organizations, and interest groups in favor of gun control. In this situation, calls for reform overwhelmed the need to unify the community and nation. The need to advocate for change

clearly shaped the situation facing the president and a failure to press for gun safety reform could undermine the eulogy. Campbell and Jamieson argue that situational changes can force the speaker to rearrange the formal components of rhetorical hybrids. Since the calls for action after the shooting were prolific, the formal characteristics needed to shift to meet these new constraints.

In the situation after Newtown, a successful deliberative eulogy needed to fulfill four characteristics. First, the eulogist facing intense pressure to act should place the deliberative appeals at the center of the speech and subordinate the eulogistic characteristics to this arrangement. This constitutes a dramatic reversal of the model of deliberative eulogies suggested by Jamieson and Campbell (1982). Despite the importance of unification strategies in any eulogistic situation, the demands for action shift the constraints on the speaker and require a more deliberative approach. Second, the deliberative appeals within the speech should still honor the dead. In some cases, the speaker might place more emphasis on the connection between the deliberative elements of the speech and the legacy of the deceased. Deliberative eulogies where the deliberative aspects dominate tend to launch campaigns for change, and the audience should be encouraged to support these policies to honor the departed. If the speaker successfully defends policies that are congruent with the values represented by the dead, then arguments for change that call upon the memory of the dead as a tool of persuasion should aid in achieving those ends.

Third, the calls to action should be genuine and compatible with the speaker's previous positions on the issue. In situations where the eulogist begins a campaign to change policies, then the credibility and authenticity of their arguments matters. The speaker will need to draw upon these elements in future speeches and arguments. Fourth, under conditions of heightened demands for change, the need to propose policies that satisfies those demands for action takes

precedence to the need to propose policies that are not divisive. The more stringent and vociferous speakers perceive these demands, the more likely they will offer policy proposals to mollify the key actors demanding change.

Jamieson and Campbell (1982) offered a model of the deliberative eulogy suited to situations where promoting unity among the audience members takes priority over other considerations. When those constraints change, or are perceived to change by the speaker, then the balance between eulogistic and deliberative elements of the hybrid must shift to accommodate those conditions. In the following section, I apply the revised deliberative eulogy model to the speech delivered by President Obama in Newtown. I argue that the president successfully enacted a fusion of deliberative and eulogistic forms in the speech, but did so under the revised model, prioritizing the argumentative over the harmonious.

Obama's eulogy in Newtown, Connecticut

In Newtown, President Obama faced different situational constraints than after the shooting in Tucson. Public opinion was more strongly in favor of reform, major organizations and politicians from his party were calling for change, and the major interest group opposed to gun safety reform was largely silent in the aftermath of the shooting. The president fulfilled eulogistic demands in Newtown but prioritized deliberative elements. As such, the speech in Newtown marks the beginning of a long and difficult push for gun control by the administration. Obama utilized strong argumentative appeals throughout his eulogy to signal to the nation that the administration intended to prioritize gun control.

Presidents "muster and create symbolic resources that unite the nation and that connect it to the national past as well as projecting it into the possible future" (Stuckey 2015, xxiv-xxv). In this section, I argue that Obama used a revised form of a deliberative eulogy in Newtown. First, I show how Obama prioritized the deliberative elements of the speech and enacted eulogistic

elements in service of that end. Second, I argue that the deliberative appeals in the speech constitute memorializing tributes to the dead. Third, I examine how the appeals for change are both genuine and compatible with Obama's previous positions on the issue. Finally, I argue that the president managed to offer policy arguments in the eulogy that did not threaten to divide the people. Obama succeeded in enacting a revised deliberative eulogy; he argued forcefully for action and did so both in honor of the dead and without proving divisive in the public square. Ultimately, this effort failed, but in his attempt, the president successfully enacted a novel fusion of deliberative and eulogistic forms that was calibrated to meet the heightened demands for change.

First, President Obama subordinated the eulogistic elements of the speech to the deliberative appeals of the speech. Rather than structuring the deliberative appeals within a primarily eulogistic speech, Obama privileged the deliberative appeals of the speech, but still fulfilled the eulogistic elements. The president confronted the death of the children and schoolteachers by reminding the community that they gathered "in memory of twenty beautiful children and six remarkable adults" who "lost their lives in a school that could have been any school" (Obama 2012b, para 2). He told Newtown that words alone cannot "match the depths of your sorrow, nor can they heal your wounded hearts" (para 3). Obama recounted the heroism of the staff and teachers at the elementary school. Those "who barricaded themselves inside classrooms," he said, "kept steady through it all, and reassured their students" (para 5). He told the nation of the ways the children were "helping one another, holding each other, dutifully following instructions" (para 7). He used the stories of children and teachers to remind America of how living up to community values can honor those who died in the school. "We know we're always doing right when we're taking care of them," Obama said, "when we're teaching them

well, when we're showing acts of kindness. We don't go wrong when we do that" (para 19). Throughout the speech in Newtown, the president used eulogistic structures and language to fulfill the eulogistic purpose of the speech, to unify the community and heal the bereaved through symbolic catharsis. However, Obama's long-term purposes, reform and building a consensus for those policies, dominated the speech.

Our first task, the president stated, is "caring for our children" (para 11). He described the protection of children as "our first job," arguing that "If we don't get that right, we don't get anything right" (para 11). He then segued into a series of questions that engaged the people on this responsibility:

> And by that measure, can we truly say, as a nation, that we are meeting our obligations? Can we honestly say that we're doing enough to keep our children -- all of them -- safe from harm? Can we claim, as a nation, that we're all together there, letting them know that they are loved, and teaching them to love in return? Can we say that we're truly doing enough to give all the children of this country the chance they deserve to live out their lives in happiness and with purpose? (para 12)

The president challenged citizens to examine their own lives and the political life of the nation. He used the series of questions to appeal to their guilt over inaction, then answered the questions for them:

> I've been reflecting on this the last few days, and if we're honest with ourselves, the answer is no. We're not doing enough. And we will have to change. Since I've been President, this is the fourth time we have come together to comfort a grieving community torn apart by a mass shooting. The fourth time we've hugged survivors. The fourth time we've consoled the families of victims. And in between, there have been an endless

> series of deadly shootings across the country, almost daily reports of victims, many of them children, in small towns and big cities all across America -- victims whose -- much of the time, their only fault was being in the wrong place at the wrong time. We can't tolerate this anymore. These tragedies must end. And to end them, we must change. (para 13-15)

He told the nation that reflection and thoughtfulness were no longer enough. Changes to laws and policies were necessary. He cited four instances of gun violence to highlight the systemic nature of the problem. He repeated this point several times to elevate its significance for citizens. The president also reminded the country that mass shootings were not the only problem, but that everyday gun violence also plagued the nation. The call to action concluded the section, the core point of the speech—to end the endless gun violence, we must change the nation.

The next section confirmed Obama's commitment to acting. He moved from the eulogistic elements at the beginning of the speech into a justification for acting, and then he declared to the nation his intentions. He said directly:

> If there is even one step we can take to save another child, or another parent, or another town, from the grief that has visited Tucson, and Aurora, and Oak Creek, and Newtown, and communities from Columbine to Blacksburg before that -- then surely we have an obligation to try. In the coming weeks, I will use whatever power this office holds to engage my fellow citizens -- from law enforcement to mental health professionals to parents and educators -- in an effort aimed at preventing more tragedies like this. (para 16-17)

Obama used the names of six different mass shootings, national traumas, after which our national response was to do nothing, to challenge people to do better. The conclusion should be obvious.

If doing nothing has failed to stop mass shootings in the past, then logic dictated that the nation must act. Obama said that he had decided to act, using "whatever power" the presidency holds to uphold the memory of the dead. The four central paragraphs of the speech drove the case for change for Obama. He framed the deliberative appeals with eulogistic elements, reminding people that children had died and using those characteristics as good reasons to act.

Second, Obama framed the push for reform as a memorial for the children and teachers who died in Newtown. He argued throughout the speech that reform of our laws is part of the nation's duty and obligation to those who died at Newtown. He said the nation has a "responsibility for every child" (para 10). Obama used a series of rhetorical questions, an appeal to Americans' guilt, guiding them to recognize that the nation needed to do more. He used the notions of life and happiness from the Declaration of Independence to strengthen the appeals. In this way, he situated the obligation to act as a civic and a religious responsibility to the dead. "All the world's religions," he said, "start with a simple question: Why are we here? What gives our life meaning? What gives our acts purpose?" (para 18). Obama finished the speech with his strongest call to memorialize the dead through action. Close to the end of the speech, Obama stated the names of all twenty children. He repeated their names slowly and somberly and then stated, "God has called them all home. For those of us who remain, let us find the strength to carry on, and make our country worthy of their memory" (para 23). Obama made it clear from the start of the Newtown speech until the end, the failure to reform our gun safety laws would fail the memory of the children who died in Sandy Hook Elementary School. The nation, he argued in Newtown, must reform its gun laws to properly memorialize the dead.

Third, the president offered genuine and credible appeals for change in his speech in Newtown. His statement to the press the day of the shooting signaled to the public that he was

going to act. He told the nation that day, “we're going to have to come together and take meaningful action” and he committed to act “regardless the politics” (Obama 2012c). In the deliberative eulogy after Newtown, he said that he “will use whatever power this office holds to engage my fellow citizens” (Obama 2012 b, para 17). He assured them that he himself would roll up his sleeves and work for real change. Obama showed forceful but calm determination when delivering this promise to the nation. His tone, his pacing, his pauses after stating the names of each mass shooting, all reveal Obama’s genuine concern and commitment. Any doubts about his frankness in this matter dissipated when the president, who normally avoided expressions of outward emotion, teared up during his initial press conference after the shooting.

Finally, the president called for the unification of the community. He did not privilege those concerns over the deliberative elements of the speech. The president made arguments in favor of policies he knew would be controversial, but still accounted for potential disagreements with other citizens. One way he did this was by refuting common arguments against gun safety regulations. For example, he said, “We will be told that the causes of such violence are complex, and that is true,” and that “no set of laws can eliminate evil from the world, or prevent every senseless act of violence,” but he argued, “that can’t be an excuse for inaction” (para 15-16). Any excuse is unacceptable Obama said, urging citizens to make the same commitment to gun safety reform he announced in the speech. As in Tucson, the president fulfilled the formal elements of a traditional eulogy and spoke in a somber tone. He enacted the rituals of unification and renewal for America, but they were proffered in support of the central message of the speech, that the time for change had arrived.

The speech in Newtown also provided the president the opportunity to develop compelling arguments for reform that he could tap into during the campaign for reform. Like the

national eulogy, the deliberative eulogy allows the speaker to later "draw on it to construct premises for other claims in dissimilar genres" (Campbell and Jamieson 2008, 79). The president would later use the arguments outlined in the Newtown speech as warrants for reform. In a speech one month after the Newtown eulogy, the president announced executive actions and proposed legislation for gun safety reform. He told the nation to remember what happened at Sandy Hook Elementary School when they considered supporting the proposals. He argued:

> What we should be thinking about, is our responsibility to care for them, and shield them from harm, and give them the tools they need to grow up and do everything that they're capable of doing. Not just to pursue their own dreams, but to help build this country. This is our first task as a society, keeping our children safe. This is how we will be judged. And their voices should compel us to change. (Obama 2013)

The central themes of caring for the nation's children and keeping them safe were all present in the Newtown speech. Additionally, the president said, "I intend to use whatever weight this office holds to make them a reality. Because while there is no law or set of laws that can prevent every senseless act of violence completely, no piece of legislation that will prevent every tragedy, every act of evil, if there is even one thing we can do to reduce this violence, if there is even one life that can be saved, then we've got an obligation to try" (ibid). The sense of obligation and the idea that all reasonable steps should be taken to prevent future violence were also present in the Newtown speech. Obama once again let the nation know that he would not only use the communicative powers of the office, but also the institutional and administrative authority to enact reform. The speech to Newtown provided argumentative resources that the president used in his speech announcing the administration's set of reform measures one month later.

In his campaign for gun safety legislation, the president indicated that Newtown provided argumentative resources for the push for reform. He also cited the shooting as the primary motivation behind his commitment to act. On January 16, 2013, he told the nation:

> When I visited Newtown last month, I spent some private time with many of the families who lost their children that day. And one was the family of Grace McDonald. Grace's parents are here. Grace was seven years old when she was struck down -- just a gorgeous, caring, joyful little girl. I'm told she loved pink. She loved the beach. She dreamed of becoming a painter. And so just before I left, Chris, her father, gave me one of her paintings, and I hung it in my private study just off the Oval Office. And every time I look at that painting, I think about Grace. And I think about the life that she lived and the life that lay ahead of her, and most of all, I think about how, when it comes to protecting the most vulnerable among us, we must act now -- for Grace. (Obama 2013)

The painting was a living reminder for the president of his responsibility to act. The deliberative elements of the Newtown speech provided the president with arguments to use, but the experiences he went through because of the tragedy provided the motivation to act.

President Obama fused deliberative appeals into his eulogy in Newtown. Public demands for reform after the shooting constrained the president, and in response he placed the appeals for action at the center of the speech. He made compelling arguments for action and appealed to America's sense of patriotism, guilt, and reason. He framed the actions he advocated as a fitting tribute to the dead. The speech also provided the president and his administration with argumentative resources in the fight for reform.

Conclusion

The death of twenty schoolchildren shocked and traumatized the nation, and the Newtown eulogy announced the intention of the president to act. Departing from his three

previous speeches after mass shootings, Obama argued for and outlined his case for reform. The president used a revised form of the deliberative eulogy, one that placed eulogistic strategies of the speech in the service of the argumentative goals of the speech. In so doing, Obama made deliberative appeals while still fulfilling the eulogistic form. He reunified the community in the speech but did so while appealing to a national audience for immediate action. He had decided to lead the push for reform, and many of the reasons for change were expressed in the Newtown speech.

Reaction to the speech was positive. After Tucson, public opinion barely changed. Within two weeks after the President's speech in Newtown, support for gun reform increased significantly. Gallup found that 58% of Americans surveyed then supported stronger restrictions on gun sales, the highest number recorded in eight years (Saad 2012). The organization also found that a record-high 47% supported passing new laws on gun safety. Additionally, the polling data showed that 92% of Americans favored universal background checks and closing the gun show loophole. Pew found that support had broadly increased across the board for specific reforms (Pew Research Center 2012). Public reaction also seemed to support the president himself. Gallup found that the president's job approval rating surged six points to 56% approval in the days after his speech, the highest for the president since October 2009 (Newport 2012). His approval among independents and Republicans increased 7%. Support for the president and the policies he supported in the Newtown speech rose significantly following the speech. Clearly, the deliberative eulogy in Newtown had a positive effect on public perceptions of the president and his policies. Media reactions were also positive to the speech. One writer called the speech "leadership at its best" and said that despite not laying out a specific policy, "the President committed to doing something," and he "seemed to be laying a foundation for new

legislation" (Adams 2012). One columnist called the speech the best of his presidency "by a country mile," making the point that Obama "is the only one who can do that—speak to the shattered people of Newtown, Conn., and to us, the American people, to make us one" (Stiehm 2012). Overall, reactions from the public and the media were positive and indicate the president succeeded in Newtown in the short term.

In Newtown, President Obama enacted a eulogy when the situation demanded, but also adapted the eulogistic form to the demands of the situation. He prioritized the arguments for gun safety reform in the speech and made a forceful call for change. Responses to the speech indicate the powerful effect of the speech in the aftermath of the shooting. After President Obama spoke, a push for gun safety reforms seemed more likely to succeed. Additionally, opponents of reform left the field open for the president. Their silence in the immediate aftermath of the shooting allowed him to speak to the nation without the interference of counter-arguments. President Obama offered sensible rebuttals to preempt attempts to block reform. And yet, not a single reform measure passed Congress (O'Keefe and Rucker 2013; Weisman 2013). In the next chapter, I explain how this came to pass and examine President Obama's subsequent response after the mass shooting in Charleston, South Carolina.

Charleston - Eulogistic jeremiad and the limits of persuasive appeals

I would like to make it crystal clear, I do not regret what I did. I am not sorry. I have not shed a tear for the innocent people I killed.

- Dylann Roof, white supremacist

The tragedy in Newtown failed to spur any measure of gun safety reform. President Obama lost the fight for action in Congress. *The New York Times* editorial board (2013) described Obama's proposed measures as a list of "what needs to be done" rather than "what political tacticians think the president could get a dysfunctional Congress to pass" (A26). O'Keefe and Rucker (2013) reported that reform efforts stalled because the National Rifle Association "galvanized its members to pepper senators with letters, e-mails, phone calls and appearances at town hall meetings." The organization "convinced enough of them that voting for the measures would jeopardize their reelection prospects" (ibid). Senate Democrats from states Obama lost in his 2012 reelection campaign voted against the reforms and killed every measure (Weisman 2013). Additionally:

> The National Rifle Association mobilized members to blanket the Senate with phone calls, e-mails and letters. The group also spent $500,000 on Wednesday alone, on an advertising campaign criticizing "Obama's gun ban" and using Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg, a deep-pocketed gun control advocate, as a foil. (ibid)

Gun manufacturers and activists showed that money and political pressure were sufficient to check the rhetorical influence of the president, even within his own party. Despite a reasonable set of legislative offerings, better data supporting the laws, and public support on his side, the president failed to persuade Congress to act. Obama's inability to move the legislature after

Newtown underscored the weakness of rational argument to check the influence of powerful interest groups.

The broad support for gun control generated by the Newtown shooting dissipated quickly. In December 2012, 58% of Americans supported stricter gun control legislation compared to 8% supporting fewer restrictions (*Gallup* 2012). By October 2014, support fell to 47% and nearly two-thirds of Americans believed that having firearms made the home safer (*Gallup* 2014). After federal reforms failed, impetus for change shifted to the states. Many states weakened, rather than strengthened gun laws. Kansas and Alaska nullified federal gun regulations on manufacturing and sales (Clark 2013); Arizona, Mississippi, Utah, and Idaho banned the maintenance and storage of gun permit records; Alabama legalized the right to carry loaded weapons in work vehicles; Arkansas legalized the right to carry firearms in churches, public universities and colleges; Kentucky legalized the open carrying of firearms in public spaces (Drash and Lyles 2013). More than 100 state gun laws passed after Newtown – 70 loosened regulations on public ownership, purchasing, and carrying of firearms (*The New York Times* 2013). At the same time, Obama's push for reform after Newtown energized gun control advocates who increased spending and organizational work (McDaniel, Allison Griner, and Krebs 2014). Support for increased restrictions, however, was insufficient to overcome the active and committed donor base of the National Rifle Association and its affiliated organizations. Short-term support for reform after Newtown was substantial, but the long-term impact faded over time and had a negligible impact on the push for stricter gun regulations.

In 2015, tragedy visited the nation again. On the evening of June 17th, a young white man, Dylann Storm Roof, walked into the basement of Emanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina and asked to join the bible study group. After an hour of listening to the church's

reverend and his black congregation, Roof pulled out a gun and killed nine, including Reverend Clementa Pinckney (Francis and Bruce 2015). Police arrested him thirteen hours later in North Carolina. During his arraignment he pled guilty to the shooting and later wrote that he chose the site because Charleston "is the most historic city" in South Carolina and there were "no skinheads, no real KKK, no one doing anything but talking on the internet" (Roof 2016). Roof's plea and statement leave no question as to the racist and supremacist ideology that motivated the shooting.

Black churches in America have always been a site for spiritual autonomy and political activism. Consequently, they often represented targets of white supremacist hate and terror (Egerton 2016). Founded by a freed slave, Denmark Vesey, Emanuel AME brought together enslaved and free black Christians to worship for the first time in Charleston. Vesey "plotted a slave rebellion but was foiled in the effort by a slave who betrayed his plans" (Dyson 2015, 67). In response, an "angry white mob" burned the church to its foundation (ibid). Before and during the Civil War, the church was a waystation on the Underground Railroad. It was an organizing hub during the Civil Rights Movement and Dr. King spoke at the church. "Over its 199 years as a black landmark in the birthplace of the Confederacy, Emanuel AME had been tried — repeatedly — by the acts of God and the malice of its neighbors. It was burned. Forced underground. Destroyed by an earthquake. Smashed by a hurricane" (Costa, Fahrenthold, and Kaplan 2015). The shooting in Emanuel AME's basement was not foreign to the history of black churches in America but a familiar, violent chapter in their story.

Compared to previous mass shootings, public figures and media outlets responded with more fatalism about the prospects for reform. Late-night talk-show host Jon Stewart (2015) said, "I honestly have nothing other than just sadness once again," and expressed frustration that "by

acknowledging it, by staring into that and seeing it for what it is, we still won't do jack shit." He compared the levels of gun violence to the threat of terrorism. "We're bringing it on ourselves," said Stewart, "that's the thing. Al-Qaeda, all those guys, ISIS, they're not shit compared to the damage that we can apparently do to ourselves on a regular basis." *The New York Times* (2015) editorial board echoed these sentiments:

> The laws of the land enable this continuing national tragedy. Congress issued a bitter lesson to the president when it rejected his proposals for greater gun safety after the 2012 massacre of 20 schoolchildren in Connecticut. Mr. Obama should marshal full political force in reviving the demand for action by Congress — a point the public strongly supports, even though Congress continues to be enslaved to the desires of the gun lobby.

The mood in the press and on late-night television was far more pessimistic after Charleston than previously.

President Obama reflected this national mood at a press conference the day of the shooting. Visibly frustrated, the president emphasized the morality of the cause despite its failure in Congress:

> At some point, we as a country will have to reckon with the fact that this type of mass violence does not happen in other advanced countries. It doesn't happen in other places with this kind of frequency. And it is in our power to do something about it. I say that recognizing the politics in this town foreclose a lot of those avenues right now. But it would be wrong for us not to acknowledge it. And at some point, it's going to be important for the American people to come to grips with it, and for us to be able to shift how we think about the issue of gun violence collectively. (Obama 2015d)

Only a transformation in national attitudes, he argued, would create a political environment amenable to gun control reforms. The president also expressed a continued commitment to reform despite the political headwinds facing his agenda. Obama insisted he was "not resigned" to failure after Charleston and had "faith we will eventually do the right thing." He admitted that moving public opinion would take time and effort and that the nation would need "to feel a sense of urgency" about solving the problem (McCarthy and Gambino 2015). Given the historical significance of Emanuel AME, the motivations of the shooter tied explicitly to white supremacy, and the intensity of Obama's prioritization of a gun reform agenda, it was unsurprising that the president travelled to Charleston and delivered a eulogy for the victims.

In what follows, I argue that the president constructed a jeremiadic eulogy in Charleston where he offered a redefinition of American citizenship through the metaphor of grace. First, I summarize the characteristics of the American jeremiad and indicate how elements of the European and Puritan versions survive in the current forms. Next, I analyze the Charleston speech and describe how the president redefined American citizenship to include more expansive notions of empathy and community. These principles, I argue, offered a broader political and civic understanding the harm done by guns and aim at achieving gun reform over the long term. Finally, I contend that Obama used the metaphor of grace for understanding how secular civic life can be restored through the application of spiritual values. The president used the occasion and a traditional eulogistic form to fuse the eulogy with the American jeremiad. Unlike previous speeches on the issue, Obama shifted away from the push for reform and toward a campaign to shift public attitudes by redefining the meaning of citizenship. Obama realized after reform failed in 2013 that no matter how reasoned the argument for regulations, legislators held hostage to the gun lobby would block action.

American jeremiad as an argument about citizenship

In this section, I outline the elements of the American jeremiad adopted from its European and Biblical precursors, identify the formal components of the traditional and contemporary American jeremiad, and distinguish between progressive and conservative variants. Andrew R. Murphy (2014) defines the jeremiad as "a form of social criticism and political rhetoric that decries corruption and degeneracy in the present and longs for a simpler, more virtuous, more godly, or ethically superior past" (1949). American colonists adapted the rhetorical form of the jeremiad to the needs of early colonial life and the values and ideals of their Puritan heritage (Bercovich 2012). The use of the jeremiad as a form of social and political suasion was "intrinsic to the narrative of the community" in early America (ibid, xiii). Colonists fused together ideas about the "progress of the Kingdom of God" from European and Biblical variants with the notion of the "progress of the American nation" tied to their immediate material and political concerns. One central principle of the traditional American jeremiad was the idea of "a unique mission or destiny" for the new nation and a vision of "an inspired errand into the wilderness, as an elect or chosen people, or as a city on a hill watched by the world as a model to be emulated" (Johannsen 1986, 80). Speakers used the vision of the nation as exceptional and blessed by providence to "define the nation" with strict social norms and mores rooted in Puritan dogmatism (Bercovich 2012, xiv). Colonial speakers "adapted the puritan jeremiad and transformed it into a vial strand of what became an enduring American political and cultural creed" (Ebel and Carlson 2011, 21). The American jeremiad created a vision of the nation developing in parallel with the spiritual agenda of Puritanism.

Speakers using the American jeremiad developed three strategies to help them communicate an exceptional vision of the nation and move audiences to act on behalf of this vision. First, they identified "a crisis in contemporary society" and depicted "present societal ills

or calamities as urgent, as requiring action, redemption and reform before it is too late, as representing the verge of an impending doom" (Murphy 2014, 1949; Johannsen 1986, 81). Warning about crisis and impending disaster was developed in tandem with exhortations that the people "sinned through failure to keep their covenant with God" who inflicted "on them as punishment" the tribulations of the present (ibid, 80). Second, speakers called upon the people to "repair the broken covenant by repenting and returning to the principles of the church" (ibid). Speakers identified values tied to "precedent from Scripture that sets out the communal norms" (Bercovich 2012, 16). They traced "a progress of decline from earlier virtuous generations (often epitomized by founders or virtuous, godly ancestors)" and called upon the people to emulate those idealistic models for citizenship (Murphy 2014, 1949; Murphy 2009). Finally, speakers described "an ideal future where God withdraws the punishment and restores the progress of his chosen people" once the values and principles of the past are restored (Johannsen 80). They called for "renewal and reform" as a way to "recapture the promise of communal life and stave off destruction" (Murphy 2009, 126; Murphy 2014). The people must return to values and principles of the Christian tradition to fulfill their destiny as a nation. The new form fused "religious tone and moral hierarchy in American myth" and developed a prophetic vision of the nation secured by the providence of God's goodwill (Singer 2010, 141). Speakers using the jeremiad in its early American form identified a crisis, tied that crisis to the degradation of some Scriptural principle or value in the present, and promised a fulfillment of divine prophecy for the people and the nation through a return to the covenant.

More recently, contemporary speakers adapted the traditional American jeremiad to include a more secular vision of America. Johannsen (1986) found that ideals and values grounded in Puritan religious beliefs were replaced by those outlined in the Declaration of

Independence and the Constitution. In the contemporary form of the American jeremiad, “values, principles, and achievements that now collectively constitute the American Dream serve as the grounding for arguments and appeals” (ibid, 80). Speakers moved away from the narrow appeal of Puritanism to a more universal promise of American citizenship. Used by Christian conservatives, civil rights leaders, environmentalists, economic analysists, presidential candidates, and presidents, the contemporary variant of the jeremiad represents one form of American rhetoric that serves the purposes of speakers with vastly contradictory purposes (Bercovich 2012; Johannsen 1986; Murphy, J. 1990; Murphy, A. 2008; Rowland and Jones 2008; Singer 2010). Given the widespread applications of the contemporary American jeremiad, the form represents a rhetorical approach that is both situationally flexible and culturally ubiquitous.

Scholars found that jeremiads of the contemporary American variety fall into two broad categories. The conservative variant focused on returning to an ideal past. Bercovich (2012) and Murphy (1990) argued the jeremiad’s formal structure limited the rhetors ability to offer progressive alternatives to the present. They posited that the jeremiad acted as a “rhetoric of social control” because it restricted the ability for the speaker to offer “policy alternatives or engage in social criticism” (Murphy 1990, 411-2). Jendrysik (2002) found that speakers used the jeremiad to support restrictive notions of citizenship and chastise those who “failed to maintain the moral certainty necessary for civic life” (362). Conservative jeremiads emphasized the “negative aspects of the present” relative to the past and employed nostalgia and longing for old social institutions and behavior patterns (Murphy 2009, 131). Speakers tended to “miss, downplay, or denigrate such developments as civil rights, the explosion of new religious movements, the women’s movement, the expansion of the franchise” and other progressive

developments in American citizenship (ibid, 168). They marginalized vulnerable populations by focusing on a narrative of American life that diminished or erased their contribution to the American Dream (ibid, 135-6). By focusing on returning the nation and its people to a past time, the conservative jeremiad grounds its prophetic vision in the past, and severely limits speakers' ability to offer a meaningful vision of progress.

In contrast, the progressive American jeremiad focused on redefining American experience and citizenship and offered a future with expanded rights and participation. Speakers using the progressive variant of the jeremiad offered expanded definitions of citizenship grounded in the secular principles of the American Dream. Murphy (2009) argued that Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and Martin Luther King all expressed a "lament over contemporary decline" and transformed this lament into a "radical promise of the American founding experience" (132). Each expanded notions of citizenship to depict a vision for justice and equality more inclusive and accessible to all. They recognized the "potential of fundamental American ideas to continually expand and incorporate new groups" (ibid). For Lincoln and Douglass, these principles demanded an end to slavery. For King, the American Dream was rooted in the promise of liberty and justice for all, not the few. Progressive jeremiads used values and ideals from the past but attempted to "restate founding principles in a language appropriate to changing times" (Murphy 2015, 114). In contrast to the conservative jeremiad, the progressive form examined the crisis and identified how current social, political, and communal norms and structures failed to uphold secular American values and ideals.

Barack Obama used many strategies found in the contemporary American jeremiad in his discourse. Harrell (2010) found that Obama used jeremiadic strategies in his book *The Audacity of Hope*. Obama argued that economic inequality presented a crisis in the nation and called for

racial and economic justice using the form of the jeremiad (ibid, 299). Obama also identified a crisis in political leadership. He pointed to a failure to "resist the temptation to impute bad faith to those who disagree" and the temptation to turn politics into partisan warfare as evidence that the American political institutions protecting the democratic system were corroding (Obama 2006, 346). Harrell showed how Obama used these strategies to make a case for adapting values of political respect and reasoned argument to crises of polarization and partisanship (2010, 167). Obama also used many of these strategies in his speech after winning the Iowa Caucus in 2008 and his speech to the National Constitution Center in March that year (Obama 2008a; 2008b). It is unsurprising then, that the president would return to these strategies after Charleston. In the following section, I examine the eulogy for Clementa Pinckney that Obama delivered in Charleston and argue that Obama fused together the eulogy with all the elements of a progressive American jeremiad.

Obama's eulogy in Charleston, South Carolina

Obama faced two challenges in his Charleston eulogy. The president needed to find a way to bring peace to the congregation of Emanuel AME and the community of Charleston. His primary responsibility was to the friends and family of the shooting victims and to a larger public traumatized by yet another mass shooting, this one animated by intense racial hatred. Obama also confronted a public increasingly disillusioned with the failure to address the national crisis of gun violence. The national mood was resigned and frustrated after Newtown (McCarthy and Gambino 2015; *The New York Times* 2015; Stewart 2015). In response, Obama created a eulogy for the Charleston victims that also contained a jeremiad about the state of politics in America. He enacted eulogistic elements at the beginning and constructed a jeremiad throughout the middle section of the speech. In the following analysis, I describe the formal elements of a eulogy present in the speech, then identify each of the characteristics of the jeremiad, and finally,

argue that the Charleston speech offers the nation a redefinition of citizenship oriented around the notion of grace.

The president began the speech by enacting the formal characteristics of a eulogy. He opened by giving praise to God and quoting from the Bible (Obama 2015a, para 1-3). Next, he acknowledged the deaths in a somber and solemn tone. “We are here today to remember a man of God who lived by faith,” he said, “A man who believed in things not seen. A man who believed there were better days ahead, off in the distance. A man of service who persevered, knowing full well he would not receive all those things he was promised, because he believed his efforts would deliver a better life for those who followed” (para 4). He addressed the family of Reverend Pinckney, the congregation of Emanuel AME, and the people of Charleston, and recast the late reverend to the realm of memory. “I cannot claim to have the good fortune to know Reverend Pinckney well,” he admitted, but said he had “pleasure of knowing him and meeting him” (para 6). Obama described the Reverend as embodying “graciousness” and said Pinckney effortlessly wore “a heavy burden of expectation” (para 6). The president described the pastor’s life (para 8), his service to the state of South Carolina (para 9-10), and as Reverend at Emanuel AME (para 12). The president remarked that Pinckney “embodied” a politics “that was neither mean, nor small” and based on “the idea that our Christian faith demands deeds and not just words” (para 11 and 13). In recasting Pinckney to the realm of memory, Obama described the reverend as “an example” and “a model” who was “slain in his sanctuary” with “members of his flock” (para 15). Obama addressed the families of the eight other victims and reminded them that “the nation shares in your grief” (para 17). In the first third of the speech, the president enacted two formal characteristics of the eulogy. He acknowledged the deaths in a tone appropriate to the

occasion and recast the relationship of the dead to the living by representing their contributions as eternal.

Obama concluded his eulogy in the final third of the speech. He told the nation that everyone receives grace regardless their station. “God gives it to us anyway,” he said and honoring that gift assures that the dead live on through the actions of survivors (para 38). Obama argued that “it would be a betrayal of everything Reverend Pinckney stood for” to “slip into a comfortable silence” and “to go back to business as usual” instead of confronting “uncomfortable truths about the prejudice that still infects our society” (para 38). He said that the nation must overcome “old habits, whereby those who disagree with us are not merely wrong but bad; where we shout instead of listen; where we barricade ourselves behind preconceived notions or well-practiced cynicism” (para 39). Obama argued that people need to understand that “justice grows out of recognition of ourselves in each other” and that “liberty depends on you being free, too” (para 40). He said people honor the memory of the dead when they “break the cycle” of political apathy and learn to have “an open mind” and “an open heart” toward political opponents (para 40). Obama said the nation must tap into a “reservoir of goodness” and extend it to all citizens in an expression of grace (para 42). Obama also enacted the final characteristic of eulogy when he sang the first couple lines of the hymn “Amazing Grace” (para 44). When the president broke into song, he invited the nation to participate in a moment of catharsis. He began to sing alone but was quickly joined by many on the stage and in the immediate audience. Obama offered more than a simple transformation of grief symbols in his Charleston eulogy. He directly engaged those in attendance in a cooperative effort to move out of a state of sorrow and together they enacted a movement to catharsis. Obama repeated the name of each victim and said that each found “grace” (para 45-53). Clearly, Obama fulfilled all the characteristics of a eulogy

in Charleston. The president acknowledged the deaths and recast their relationship to the living in the first section of the speech. In the concluding section, he assured people that the dead live on and guided the nation to catharsis through song.

In addition to conducting a eulogy, the president forwarded a critique and redefinition of American citizenship using jeremiadic form. Obama identified twin crises facing American society, racial discrimination and gun violence, described a "blindness" to other's suffering that corrupted our politics and social relations, and called upon the nation to return to principles and values that are spiritually grounded in the notion of grace. In doing so, he enacted a jeremiad in Charleston. The Charleston eulogy is a contemporary progressive jeremiad (Murphy 2008) in the sense that it redefined citizenship using founding values and principles. First, Obama identified two national crises precipitated by social and political failures of American institutions. Gun violence and racial discrimination seemed unsolvable and intersected when nine members of Emanuel AME were killed. Second, the president argued that "blindness" to suffering at the individual level prevented institutions from enacting common sense, publicly supported, reforms. Rational argument, reasoned debate, and public deliberation failed to establish grounds to solve key policy problems despite broad public support. Third, Obama redefined citizenship as a relation between individuals and the community that is grounded in empathy. He used the metaphor of "grace" to connect spiritual values that justify empathy to the secular principle of citizenship. He demonstrated how the principle of grace can structures good citizenship practices and thereby create a more just and equal society. He described a future oriented around graceful citizenship and argued that racial discrimination, economic inequality, and gun violence could be overcome with reasonable solutions in that world. In Charleston, Obama delivered a powerful

progressive American jeremiad. He enacted a eulogy for the dead while simultaneously constructing a compelling jeremiad about the contours of American citizenship.

The jeremiad began immediately following the first half of the eulogy when the president identified two areas of American politics that had failed – gun control and race relations. He described these crises using two strategies. On the one hand, the president used the first half of the eulogy for the shooting victims to function as an argument itself. Rood (2017) calls this strategy the "warrant of the dead" (48). The rhetor does more that mention those who died, but uses them to make an "explicit or implicit claim that the dead place a demand on the living" (ibid). In Charleston, Obama relied on the eulogy in the first third of the speech to warrant his argument about discrimination and gun violence. Obama recast the relationship of the dead to the living and immediately called upon their memory when describing the national crisis. The president spoke each victim's name in turn and referenced their faith and kindness (Obama 2015a, para 16).

The president also described the meaning of the black church in America (para 17-20) and connected the institution to fundamental American values. "A sacred place, this church," said Obama, "Not just for blacks, not just for Christians, but for every American who cares about the steady expansion of human rights and human dignity in this country; a foundation stone for liberty and justice for all" (20). The president identified the site of the shooting as evidence of its importance to the national conversation about race and guns. He implied that the killing of citizens violated sacred principles at the heart of the national promise. Obama said the shooting "drew on a long history of bombs and arson and shots fired at churches," and described the act as "a way to terrorize and oppress" (21). The shooting was grounded in an ideology of white supremacy and represented arguments that justified the "systemic oppression and racial

subjugation" of non-white people in America throughout its' history (29). Obama also characterized the shooting as evidence of failure on gun policy. The president pointed out that when "eight of our brothers and sisters are cut down in a church basement, 12 in a movie theater, 26 in an elementary school" the nation turns its attention to gun violence (para 34.) But this focus, he said, ignores the "30 precious lives cut short by gun violence in this country every single day," "the survivors crippled," and the "children traumatized and fearful every day as they walk to school" (ibid). In his Charleston speech, Obama constructed the first element of the jeremiad by establishing connections between Charleston and both systemic and institutional discrimination facing black Americans and the public health crisis caused by widespread gun violence.

Next, Obama described the root cause of the crises as a fundamental loss of empathy in American citizens. The president argued that policy failures were the result of citizens and government ignoring the suffering of fellow citizens. In a comprehensive study of Obama's public speeches as president, Fengjie, Jia, and Yingying (2016) found that Obama was likely to use metaphor "to replace something abstract for those common and understandable to express his ideas in a more vivid and visual way." In Charleston, the president articulated a metaphor of blindness as one way to understand the flaws in American character that caused the crises. Some in the country, he said "were blind to the pain that the Confederate flag stirred in too many of our citizens" (Obama 2015a, para 29). Others were "blind to the way past injustices continue to shape the present" (para 31). Insensitivity and a lack of empathy, he argued, permitted "many of our children to languish in poverty, or attend dilapidated schools, or grow up without prospects for a job or for a career" (ibid). Racial discrimination and its social, political, and economic

impacts were rooted in a lack of empathy; Obama characterized this through the metaphor of "blindness" to others' pain and suffering.

In another example, Obama argued that the failure to pass gun safety reform was caused by public apathy. He described a citizenry "blind to the unique mayhem that gun violence inflicts upon this nation" (para 34). This metaphorical blindness prevented individuals from comprehending the human toll that gun violence inflicts the community. He said the impact is felt by "entire communities whose grief overflows every time they have to watch what happened to them someplace else" (ibid). Citizens are forced to relive the "unique mayhem that gun violence inflicts" every time there is a new mass shooting, creating trauma in the national spirit. "The vast majority of Americans," Obama pointed out, even "the majority of gun owners – want to do something about this," yet nothing happened at the policy level (para 35). Obama reasoned that reform failures could be directly traced to a lack of empathy. Obama traced two systemic crises – racial discrimination and gun violence – to a singular cause: citizens who no longer felt their fellow citizen's pain and suffering.

In the final stage of his progressive jeremiad, Obama guided the nation toward change. To do so, he needed to "restate founding principles in a language appropriate to changing times" and offer a vision of the future where the crisis is resolved (Murphy 2015, 114). In Charleston, the president redefined American citizenship around the principle of grace. In the previous sections of the speech, Obama argued that the crises facing America undermined justice and liberty for all citizens. In this section, he described a form gracious citizenship that embodied those principles. Thomas Hobbes (1883) defined grace as "that Vertue, by which man is said to do a good turn, or to do service to a man in need; not for his own but for his cause to whom he does it. Great Grace is when the need is great; or when they are hard or difficult things that are

conferred." Hobbes saw grace as a principled approach to politics that prioritized the needs of the community above the needs of the individual. Obama used a similar idea as a model for empathetic citizenship in Charleston. Through the idea of grace, Obama use metaphor to redefine citizenship.

Ricoeur (1975) outlined two advantages for using metaphors as models for behavior. First, the model functions like an "extended metaphor" that "consists in a complex network of statements" rather than a single transitive connection (243). A citizenship based in grace did not mean one type of citizen, a single act of patriotism, or one of sacrifice, but could be manifested through many different attitudes and behavior. Second, through the metaphor of grace, Obama tapped into the capacity for metaphor to function as a model for human action. This use also "throws into relief the connection between heuristic function and description" in metaphor (244). The metaphor operates poetically through its depiction and invention and heuristically by offering an instruction in behavior. In describing how empathy strengthens the nation, Obama depicted a citizenship and community redefined through grace.

Robert Putnam and David Campbell (2010) conducted an extensive survey of American religious belief and described tolerance and empathy as examples of grace in American society. Their research found that "a belief in God—serves to bind the nation together" and that spiritual and religious belief "is an article of patriotic faith that the nation owes its very existence and survival, to a God in the heavens" (517). They discovered that common faith beliefs bind people together and offer resources that "abound during the solemn ceremonial moments of our public life, when the national sense of unity is strongest" (517). Putnam and Campbell found Americans have many friends and colleagues from diverse faith backgrounds and this "religious bridging" offers opportunities to build connections among communities (531-2). They also reported

"convincing evidence in favor of a spillover effect," where people create "a web of interlocking personal relationships of people of many different faiths" despite partisan attachment (532-3, 550). Obama articulated grace as a metaphor in Charleston and advocated for similar religious bridging and spillover effects.

President Obama used two primary strategies to redefine citizenship in the Charleston speech. First, he provided four examples of citizenship embodying grace in action for the nation to model. Second, he offered a vision of the future where new forms of citizenship resolved the present crises. Obama's first example of grace was Reverend Pinckney himself. He described their first encounter and recalled "his graciousness" and "his reassuring baritone" (Obama 2015a, para 6). The president pointed to Pinckney's tireless advocacy for a party out of power in South Carolina, his conviction, and his determination to fight for seemingly lost causes (para 10). "He was full of empathy and fellow feeling," said Obama, "able to walk in somebody else's shoes and see through their eyes" (para 12). Pinckney's ability to comprehend the perspective and suffering of others, argued the president, exemplified grace. Pinckney placed the greater good before his own self-interest, and this represented a model for expressing grace through public service.

The president used the congregation of Emanuel AME church as his second example of grace. "Over the course of centuries," said the president, black churches like Emanuel AME served as "hush harbors," "praise houses," "rest stops," "bunkers," "community centers," "places of scholarship and network," and "places where children are loved and fed and kept out of harm's way, and told that they are beautiful and smart—and taught that they matter" (para 18). Organizations like Emanuel AME express grace because they are sites of safety and empowerment for vulnerable populations. Their lessons and resources support communities

larger than themselves and this benevolence and service represents another model for grace. Emanuel AME is a microcosm of "that which is best about American citizenship" and "a crucial waystation for many movements hoping to expand the notion to include all peoples of the nation" (para 20). Emanuel AME embodies grace because it works, spiritually and materially, to contribute to the project of securing the promise of American citizenship.

President Obama described the response of the victims' families as a third example of grace. He told the nation of how the families of the shooting victims offered "words of forgiveness" to the shooter, despite "unspeakable grief" (para 23). The congregation "opened the church doors and invited a stranger to join." The president described a model for justice that does not blame the wrongdoer but offers forgiveness, a relationship where grace offers victims reconciliation. Obama depicted the mayor and the people of Charleston as citizens full of grace in his final example. He said the city displayed "a thoughtful introspection and self-examination that we so rarely see in public life" (para 24). When the shooter attacked members of the community, the people responded with kindness, openness, and thoughtfulness. President Obama used the Charleston speech to depict four examples of citizenship based in grace—the late Reverend Pinckney, Emanuel AME church, the victims' families, and the people of Charleston. Each example provided the nation with a different aspect of social and political empathy that defines citizenship through its relationship with and dependence on others. Grace "grows out of recognition of ourselves in each other," said the president, and the understanding that "my liberty depends on you being free too" (para 40). Obama used each example to display for America examples of a politics and society that combats extreme polarization and the worst impacts of acute racial discrimination.

In addition to providing models of citizenship grounded in grace, the president described a future that could be achieved through a return to this covenant. This future, Obama said, would follow the "imperative of a just society" and its people would understand that "faith demands deeds and not just words" (para 13). Grace, he argued, provided a moral blueprint for the American citizen to reduce the most acute effects of racial bias. He reminded Americans that Confederate flag removal was good policy but just a step in the right direction. He stated that flag removal was not an "insult [to] the valor of Confederate soldiers" but a recognition that "the cause of slavery – was wrong" (para 30). He pointed out that racial injustice will not disappear overnight, but the removal was "one step in an honest accounting of America's history" and "a modest but meaningful balm" for wounds of discrimination (ibid). "By taking down that flag," Obama said, the people help "to form a more perfect union" and they "express God's grace" but added that he did not "think God wants us to stop there" (para 30-1). "Perhaps," he hoped, the people would take the moment after Charleston to "ask some tough questions" and "embrace changes in how we train and equip our police so that the bonds of trust between law enforcement and the communities they serve make us all safer" (para 32). He urged Americans to treat "every child as important, regardless of the color of their skin or the station into which they were born" (para 33). Obama called upon the nation to recognize our "common humanity" and "express God's grace" by adopting sensible laws to combat bias and racial discrimination in the judicial and legal system (para 33). He told the nation that a country in which citizens infused with grace would find empathy and tolerance and would begin to eliminate institutional and systemic discrimination through reasonable policy changes.

Obama also depicted a future where citizenship based in grace overcomes the polarizing tendencies of American politics and repairs broken institutions of governance. Political

argument, he said, becomes imbalanced when people used issues and historical grievance as a "sword to justify injustice, or shield against progress" (para 40). He posited that instead, people should use historical knowledge as a "manual for how to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past – how to break the cycle. A roadway toward a better world" (ibid). He demonstrated how grace offers empathetic resources for Americans to understand historical wrongs as opportunities for reconciliation and cooperation. He urged the nation to recognize the "good people on both sides of these debates" (ibid). This, he argued, is the first step toward fixing big problems. If people treated their opponents as mistaken rather than evil, then they would no longer fall into "rancor and complacency," but overcome their "short-sightedness and fear" to solve crises together (para 28). By "acknowledging the pain and loss of others, even as we respect the traditions and ways of life" of people who disagree, Obama said citizens "express God's grace" (para 35). Obama described a political world where each person can "see" the position and reasoning of their political rivals and understand their point of view. He envisioned a future where gun violence does not become a tool of political division, but a meaningful concern of the entire nation. Thus, Obama enacted the final characteristic of the progressive jeremiad through the idea that grace was a central principle of citizenship and then described a society and politics grounded in those principles.

Obama also structured the themes and movement of the eulogy around the notion of grace. He described the life of Clementa Pinckney as one inspired by grace (ibid, para 6). Similarly, the president depicted the other victims of the shooting as "full of life and so full of kindness" (para 16). Obama developed the theme of grace throughout his jeremiad and offered an enactment of catharsis in his rendition of the song "Amazing Grace" (para 43-44). The song "Amazing Grace" framed messages of reconciliation and citizenship in the speech. The line the

president sang, “Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me; I once was lost, but now I’m found; was blind but now I see,” articulated the central themes of the Charleston speech (para 44). Here the president referenced the nation as “lost” and “blind” due to a lack of grace, but then through grace they have been “found” and can “see” the pain and suffering of others. Finally, the president repeated each victims’ name with the phrase “found that grace” to conclude the speech (para 45-53).

Incorporating discussion of policy changes within a eulogy poses strategic problems for a speaker. Obama used the formal characteristics and strategies of the progressive jeremiad to overcome these barriers. Jamieson and Campbell (1982) argued that the fusion of strategies in deliberative eulogies forces rhetors to consider several complications. They found that blending a eulogy with agenda-setting functions of the presidency “creates a tension” that must be addressed “without diminishing the deceased” in the minds of the people (ibid, 152). Second, they contended that policy talk during eulogies can create an impression that the rhetor is revealing an “unbecoming eagerness” and can undermine the message in the other elements of the speech (ibid, 153). Third, they argued that rhetorical hybrids must balance “recurrent and unique rhetorical elements” and they are successful to the extent the rhetor makes them “compatible or incompatible” with each element (ibid, 156). Finally, they found when speakers represent institutions, their discourse must “simultaneously satisfy institutional requirements” and remain consistent with the “legislative program and public persona” of the rhetor (ibid, 157). Presidents who deliver policy-oriented eulogies address competing expectations must confront each of these barriers.

Obama applied the jeremiadic form and the concept of grace to resolve these strategic complications. First, Obama cast the deceased as embodiments of the principle of grace. He used

the same principle to redefine citizenship and did not diminish the dead in his turn to the jeremiad. Rather, their example offered a model for other citizens to follow to repair the broken covenant. Second, the president did not appear too eager to advance the agenda over the concern for the dead. Citizens infused with grace would inevitably resolve the policy crisis facing the nation, so Obama did not need to press a policy agenda as he did after Newtown. Third, grace connected the recurrent formal elements of the eulogy with the elements of Obama's jeremiad. He described the victims of the shooting as filled with grace, the institution where it happened, and the people of the community. Each example tied into central themes of the eulogy. The president said that people and institutions would continue the work of the dead. The grace expressed by the living mirrors and honors the grace represented by the dead. Finally, the eulogy satisfied the requirements of the office and institution Obama represented. He delivered remarks befitting the presidency, respectfully honored the dead, and moved people to catharsis. Obama also embodied his legislative agenda and public persona. His focus on racial injustice and gun violence reflected his broader policy priorities and his interaction with the immediate audience, including singing "Amazing Grace," tied directly to the call and response tradition of the church. Obama fused together eulogy and jeremiad through the lens of grace. Grace connected key themes and elements from the eulogy to the jeremiad and vice versa.

President Obama's eulogy for Clementa Pinckney represented a hallmark example of fusing eulogy and jeremiad into a single address. The president offered a detailed critique of social relations and simultaneously guided the community to catharsis. He presented a eulogy for the fallen and reflected on the lives that they lived and the lessons they imparted. Obama constructed a jeremiad that redefined citizenship as a relation of grace between members of the community. He identified a crisis in the community, pointed to a lack of empathy at the

institutional and personal levels of society as the cause of the crisis, and offered grace as a principle of citizenship that would fulfill the promise for the nation envisioned by the founders. Obama encouraged the nation to follow the model of those who died. In doing so, he argued, the nation would repair the covenant broken between citizens and bridge the fundamental political and social divides preventing reasonable policy action. The Charleston speech represented Obama's finest contribution to the discourse on gun violence and provided a touchstone example how eulogy can be fused with other generic forms.

Conclusion

Public reaction to the speech was overwhelmingly positive. Leonard Pitts Jr. (2015), longtime columnist for *The Miami Herald*, said that Obama delivered "a speech for history." John Dickerson (2015), host of CBS's *Face the Nation*, called it the "most religious speech of his presidency and one of the most overtly religious speeches from a president in a long while." Dickerson added that the speech was "not a rhetorical exercise, or not merely one" but "a demonstration of the power the president had found in the example of the people of Charleston." President Obama, Dickerson opined, "was showing—the power he was trying to summon in this speech came from his own feeling of gratitude and obligation to serve as an example of grace" (ibid). James Fallows of *The Atlantic* said the speech was "his most fully successful performance as an orator" (2015). As these few examples show, the speech received widespread public acclaim.

Three aspects of the Charleston speech explain this reaction. Obama's selection of grace as the theme for the speech resonated with opinion leaders. Fallows (2015) argued that the theme of grace was a "stroke of genius" and strongly praised the "start-to-end framing of his remarks." It was not only liberals who praised the speech, Patrick Brennan (2017), writer for *National Review*, described with awe a "president of the United States proclaiming the beatific vision"

through an explication of civic grace. Kevin Liptak (2015) praised the “touching eulogy” and expressed appreciation for the “thoughtful meditation on race” delivered by the president. Brian McGee (2015) highlighted the rhetorical eloquence of the speech and commented that Obama offered both an “admiring summary of lives well lived” and a vision of America “in which the better angels of our nature will and must prevail.” There is no question that the image and sound of the president singing “Amazing Grace” resonated with people around the nation. Brian Korte (2015) called the speech “electrifying” and Twitter users began referring to Obama as #ReverendPresident (Whaley 2015). In Charleston, the president delivered one of his most resonant and powerful speeches. The choice of grace as a theme, the seamless integration of jeremiad with eulogy, and the use of song to engage the immediate audience all helped Obama achieve this oratorical success.

Obama would never deliver another public eulogy for mass shooting victims. After a shooting at Umpqua Community College in Oregon later that year, the president held a press conference and expressed frustration at the national inaction on gun violence. He said, “our thoughts and prayers are not enough,” and added that prayers do not “capture the heartache and grief and anger that we should feel,” nor do they “prevent this carnage from being inflicted someplace else” (Obama 2015e). He expressed frustration with the lack of progress but remained committed to fighting for gun safety reform. Obama said he was not going to ignore the problem. “I’m going to bring this up,” he said, “Each time this happens I am going to say that we can actually do something about it” (ibid). Obama tried a strategy of public appeal and despite increased support for gun control, little was accomplished. He attempted to persuade the nation with an argument grounded in principles of empathy and grace but no new laws were passed at

the federal level. Despite these setbacks, the president continued to press for reform and act, when able, using executive authority.

The tone of Obama's remarks about guns after Charleston reflected his increasing weariness in speaking about the issue. Charleston represented a final attempt to persuade the nation of the need for gun safety reform. While his many speeches on gun control enacted several different strategies for dealing with intractable political issues, the Charleston speech provided the most coherent appeal to engaged citizens. In fusing the eulogy for Clementa Pinckney with a jeremiad on gun violence and racial injustice, the president offered a salve for the community's grief and a path for the nation to solve crises. Charleston was an exemplar of rhetorical hybridity and offered a model for citizenship grounded in grace.

Obama's gun violence legacy and the limits of the rhetorical presidency

There's been another mass shooting in America -- this time, in a community college in Oregon.

- Barack Obama, October 1, 2015

Barack Obama delivered seven eulogies for mass shooting victims during his time as president. He designed excellent speeches, enacted them successfully, and received high marks from the public and press. Despite failing to achieve comprehensive reform, President Obama remained committed to gun safety regulations. Unable to secure legislative victory, he settled for executive action. In January 2016, the president issued directives to the federal government ordering increased enforcement of current regulations and tightening federal restrictions on certain types of gun purchases. President Obama clearly believed that gun safety reform would benefit the public and pushed for reform long after it was clear that the fight to pass stricter regulations in Congress had failed.

Obama showed great concern for the topics of gun violence and mass shootings throughout his presidency. He focused a significant amount of his persuasive energy and administrative power on the issue. The eulogies he delivered for victims of mass shootings represent a central pillar of his rhetorical legacy. His failure to persuade Congress of the need for reform revealed a fundamental flaw in American democratic governance. Obama marshalled good data, better arguments, public support, and his gift for eloquence in support of the cause. Despite these efforts, committed partisans and special interests blocked his effort to persuade key legislators. The failure of Obama's gun control agenda revealed that rational argument and reasoned debate are insufficient to overcome committed partisans and special interests.

In the preceding study, I argued that the gun control debate highlights substantial limitations to the power of the rhetorical presidency (Tulis 1987). In the following section, I briefly review the findings of each case study, identify the import of Obama's mass shooting eulogies for rhetorical theory, and offer several contributions to and potential avenues for future research. I conclude with a short reflection on the events that have transpired since this project began.

In the first study, I examined President Obama's eulogy in Tucson. The shooting revealed how political dysfunction in America creates the conditions for political violence. Imagery and discourse that promoted physical violence against political figures dominated the social media landscape during the 2010 midterm elections (Kalmoe 2014; Gervais 2014; Sorial 2012). Given immense polarization and partisan division, it was unsurprising that the president chose to approach the issue from a broader perspective and speak about principles of good citizenship and respect for each other. In Tucson, Obama delivered a *national eulogy* (Campbell and Jamieson 2008) that did not press for immediate reform but set the stage for future reform by articulating values and practices designed to bridge political divisions between American citizens.

Obama faced severe political constraints in Tucson. His speech focused on the vitriol suffusing American political discourse at the time. He avoided any discussion of gun control or reforming the nations' gun laws. While presidents have substantial institutional and communication infrastructure to set the policy agenda (Stuckey 2015), Obama understood that any attempt to press for reform faced certain defeat in Congress. A gun control agenda could also have cost Obama his bid at re-election. In the Tucson case study, I argue that substantial constraints on presidential action combined with a polarized electorate undermined the persuasive effects of the national eulogy. In a national eulogy, the president attempts to speak to

the nation as one. If the public suffers from acrimonious partisanship and extreme polarization, it becomes very difficult to speak to the nation as one civic body. In response, Obama set about bridging these divides. However, in the toxic political atmosphere in 2011, systemic dysfunction prevented Obama's national eulogy from healing the nation's trauma.

In the second study, I analyzed Obama's eulogy for the victims of the Sandy Hook Elementary shooting in Newtown, Connecticut. Obama faced different situational constraints after Newtown. The president won his re-election campaign just one month prior and public outrage over the Newtown shooting was more fervent than after Tucson (American Federation of Teachers 2012; Collins 2012; Cuomo 2012; *Denver Post* 2012; MacAskill 2012; *New York Times* 2012; *San Bernardino Sun* 2012; Sedensky 2013; Soltis and Sauchelli 2012; *Washington Post* 2012). In response, the president enacted a *deliberative eulogy* (Jamieson and Campbell 1982) that outlined the administration's commitment to gun reform as a policy priority and announced the start of a push for new gun regulations. Obama told the nation that his administration would implement several new executive orders that would tighten current regulations and increase enforcement of those laws already in place. He also announced that he would use the power of his office to lead the push for legislative reform in Congress.

Obama used direct and uncompromising language in Newtown. He argued that Newtown placed a moral burden on the nation. He declared the time for talk about gun control over and demanded that Congress take action to strengthen regulations. Public support for reform and clear demands for federal gun control offered the president substantial advantages after Newtown. It appeared for a time that the campaign for reform would succeed. However, interest groups against reform and four Democratic Senators blocked legislation. Despite having public opinion, better arguments, moral authority, and overwhelming data on his side, the president

could not leverage these advantages to overcome opposition. In the case study, I argue that the Newtown speech properly blended argumentative and value appeals, constructed a compelling moral argument for reform, and exhorted the nation to act. However, the eulogy did not overcome partisan influence. Opposition by interest groups overwhelmed the rhetorical influence of the president. Newtown revealed that system-wide influence of interest groups limits the power of the rhetorical presidency.

In the final case study, I examined Obama's eulogy for the Charleston shooting victims. Once again, the president confronted a very difficult situation. Legislative reform failed to pass Congress. The failure of President Obama's public and strident support for gun reform revealed substantial restraints on presidential influence. Public outrage was widespread after the Charleston shooting and focused on the failure to pass reform efforts (*New York Times* 2015; Stewart 2015). Obama also needed to contend with the racial motivation for the shooting. Rather than press for reform, a strategy already tried in the aftermath of Newtown, the president articulated an expansive vision of gracious citizenship, redefining what role empathy plays in the construction of good citizens and healthy practices of citizenship.

To accomplish this goal, Obama fused his eulogy for the Charleston victims with a *progressive American jeremiad* (Murphy 2008). American rhetors have long used the jeremiad as a vehicle for defining citizenship in America. Obama used the jeremiad in Charleston to depict a future politics where mass incarceration, mass shootings, poverty, everyday gun violence, job discrimination, and police brutality no longer haunt American civic society. These problems represent systemic failures of civic responsibility. The president appealed directly to the people's sense of empathy and goodwill in the Charleston eulogy. Arguments and reason had failed the

nation in a time of crisis and Obama argued that only through the principle of grace could citizens build a society that protects its most acutely vulnerable populations.

Over his two terms in office, Barack Obama launched a national push to strengthen American gun regulations and failed. In Tucson, he avoided an immediate defeat over reform and set the stage for later actions. By establishing the parameters for a reasonable debate over firearms in the Tucson eulogy, Obama avoided sabotaging his own re-election prospects and established a framework for a future debate over gun control. Obama announced in Newtown his commitment to reform. He directly leveraged the moral outrage of the moment to set an agenda for changing federal gun regulations. Despite substantial situational advantages, the president's push for reform failed. Newtown proved that practical arguments face significant barriers when confronting interest group politics and financial influence on Capitol Hill. Obama's final attempt to forward moral arguments for change occurred in Charleston. He articulated a vision of citizenship grounded in the principle of grace and depicted a politics and society that prioritized empathy and care between citizens. Each eulogy offered insight into President Obama's approach to the crisis of gun violence and revealed key limitations to the rhetorical influence of the president. Before offering a summary of the study's contributions, I briefly analyze a speech from President Obama where he articulated the most cogent defense of reform to gun laws.

Umpqua as Crystallized Argument

Obama used reasonable arguments to support gun control after the Charleston eulogy, but did not deliver another public eulogy for mass shooting victims. He did speak again after a mass shooting, however. In October 2015, the president offered a cogent summary of arguments for reform. After a shooting at Umpqua Community College, the president made a statement to the press and delivered a stinging rebuke of American media coverage of mass shootings and political inaction. He used direct argument, refutation, and a call to action to chastise the media

and American people. He condensed and synthesized all the argumentative strategies developed in his previous eulogies. The speech delivered after Umpqua made a strong case for political action and reform.

Obama reminded the media that once again a community torn apart by mass shooting must find its way through grief and argued that action was necessary (Obama 2015e). He reflected on the fact that "America will wrap everyone who's grieving with our prayers" but forcefully stated these prayers were insufficient (para 4). "As I said a few months ago," he said, "and I said a few months before that, and I said each time we see one of these mass shootings, our thoughts and prayers are not enough" (para 5). He said that prayers do "nothing to prevent this carnage from being inflicted someplace else in America – next week, or a couple months from now" (para 5). The president directly refuted the idea that thoughts and prayers solve material harm caused by actual weapons. Instead, Obama argued that there must be a change in the pattern of public response that follows mass shootings. The reporting about the shootings, the conversation after the event, the offering of thoughts and prayers, and the subsequent failure to act were all part of a pattern of responses to mass shootings. Obama reminded the nation that it had a conversation about gun violence "after Columbine and Blacksburg, after Tucson, after Newtown, after Aurora, after Charleston," but none of those discussions resulted in reform (para 8).

The president also refuted key arguments against reform during the Umpqua press conference. Obama did not engage in refutation or rebuttal in his eulogies, and the press conference represented a distinct shift away from his previous approach to the topic. In response to arguments for more firearms on the streets and fewer regulations, Obama cited public opinion data that showed "scores of responsible gun owners in this country" who understand more

regulations saves lives (para 10). The president rebutted arguments that regulations are ineffective by citing statistics from states with more regulations. He offered empirical examples from Great Britain and Australia to highlight America's unique status among western liberal democracies. In response to the charge that he was politicizing the issue, the president countered that such action was morally justified. He stated that "This is something we should politicize," and added that, "It is relevant to our common life together, to the body politic" (para 13). Finally, the president drew a comparison between anti-terrorism policies and gun control policies to refute the claim that politicians have done everything within their power to combat the crisis. "We spend over a trillion dollars, and pass countless laws, and devote entire agencies to preventing terrorist attacks on our soil," he pointed out, "And yet, we have a Congress that explicitly blocks us from even collecting data on how we could potentially reduce gun deaths" (para 13). Obama used the opportunity after Umpqua to lay out a cogent response to the arguments of gun rights advocates.

Lastly, the president made a call to action. He argued that people must make gun control a "litmus test" issue for any politician seeking office if they want laws to change. This argument directly contrasted with Obama's calls to political empathy and civil discourse in his Charleston and Tucson eulogies. Clearly, the president had changed his view of gun control and his Umpqua speech reflected this change. Obama argued that the nation is not helpless and framed the failure to enact reforms as "a political choice that we make to allow this to happen" (para 14). He pointed to other public health emergencies to show that the national response to mass shootings was nonsensical:

> When Americans are killed in mine disasters, we work to make mines safer. When Americans are killed in floods and hurricanes, we make communities safer. When roads

> are unsafe, we fix them to reduce auto fatalities. We have seatbelt laws because we know it saves lives. So the notion that gun violence is somehow different, that our freedom and our Constitution prohibits any modest regulation of how we use a deadly weapon, when there are law-abiding gun owners all across the country who could hunt and protect their families and do everything they do under such regulations doesn't make sense. (para 14)

The president compared gun regulations to other public safety regulations, a framing that did not appear in Tucson, Newtown, or Charleston eulogies. Obama's focus on public safety shifted the debate away from arguments about gun rights. Instead, he argued the nation should focus on the health and wellbeing of American citizens.

The president also made a call to action directly to the people. "I'd ask the American people," he said, "to think about how they can get our government to change these laws, and to save lives, and to let young people grow up" (para 15). He asked the people "to think about how they can get our government to change these laws, and to save lives, and to let young people grow up" (para 15). What is needed, he argued is a "change of politics on this issue," to create a situation in which people make "a determination as to whether this cause of continuing death for innocent people should be a relevant factor in your decision" (para 15). After Charleston, the president shifted toward a more direct argument for reform. He presented a cogent case for reform, a case that opponents of reform could not answer in argumentative terms. But on gun reform, the better arguments were not powerful enough to produce legislative action.

Contributions of the Study

In this study, I examined the trajectory of President Obama's argument on gun control through a consideration of three mass shooting eulogies and found many takeaways for both rhetorical criticism and an understanding of American civic engagement. First, the presidential use of eulogy toward deliberative ends is limited by that president's political situation. Eulogies

represent a category of epideictic speech, or public address of praise and blame. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) argued that epideictic "strengthens disposition toward action" by enhancing the listeners' "adherence to certain values" (50-1). These discourses often highlight the deeds of "exemplars who set the tone for civic community" and the eulogist frequently adopts the "unique role as a teacher of civic virtue" (Hauser 1999, 14). Typically, the eulogist selects "deeds that transcend partisan factions and selfish interests" to reinforce community values (ibid, 15). Additionally, Vivian (2006) found that epideictic rhetoric "organizes the terms of public remembrance in order to shape perceptions of shared values and commitments serviceable to future deliberative agendas" (2). Campbell and Jamieson (2008) argued that the president can enact substantial reform by grounding deliberative arguments in national eulogy.

First, the preceding study outlines limitations of the power of deliberative eulogies. While Campbell and Jamieson (2008) argued that presidents often turn eulogies into opportunities for advancing their agenda, this contention holds only for those areas where partisan polarization does not dominate the issue landscape. Obama's gun eulogies failed to produce legislative action, not because there was a failure of invention or style, but because the political system was dominated by special interests opposed to any regulation. Clearly, presidents can use eulogy to forward grounds for deliberative argument. However, the limitations and barriers imposed by the systemic and widespread political dysfunction in America makes the effectiveness of this quite limited.

Second, I demonstrated that rhetorical hybrids are common in presidential rhetoric. Presidents often blend eulogy with deliberation and jeremiad. in the dispensation of their constitutional duties. Sometimes, the contextual and formal limitations they face shape their choice and it is important for rhetorical scholars to measure the import of these decisions. Some

genres represent “stylistic and substantive responses to perceived situational demands” repeated over time (Campbell and Jamieson 1978, 19; Rowland 1991). Eulogies fall into this category because all speakers must respond to the person’s death. I looked at three variations within this category, the national, deliberative, and jeremiadic eulogies and analyzed their effectiveness in response to changing contextual limitations. I found that identifying the hybridization pattern in the speech can more clearly reveal the problem a speaker confronted and can offer insight into the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of a speech.

Third, even when eulogies fully enact the generic or hybrid form, that does not guarantee their success in producing action. In a country marked by high levels of partisanship (Doherty 2017) where public opinion on specific issues increasingly reflects party loyalty rather than rationality (Newport and Dugan 2017), the symbolic and rhetorical influence of the president can be quite narrow. In the three eulogies I discussed, Obama’s eloquent enactment of generic forms could not overcome deeply rooted attitudes, irrationality stoked by the spread of disinformation, and the raw power of money in politics. The mass shooting eulogies of President Obama should disabuse any rhetorical critic of the notion that a finely crafted speech delivered at the right moment can overcome severe deficiencies in the American polis.

Finally, the speeches reveal that Obama possessed a unique capacity to speak to a broad understanding of American values and communitarian ethics. In Tucson, he argued that political divisiveness would short-circuit any meaningful conversation about gun violence in America. In Newtown, he harnessed a community’s grief and used the full weight of moral outrage to launch an agenda for gun reform. In Charleston, he offered grace as a new way to define citizenship and called upon the nation to extend its empathy to the most vulnerable citizens. Each eulogy

provides insight into the nature of American democracy and the character of its citizens. Each variation offers critics continuing insight into the character of Obama's rhetoric.

Takeaways for Citizens

Additionally, there are several takeaways for the practices of civic engagement. First, the communal breakdown initially identified by Putnam (2000) in his study of American organizational life continues apace. The inability to resolve the gun crisis in America is a symptom of this continuing fracturing and President Obama's failure to pass gun reform revealed the fundamental disconnect between the ideals of the nation and the functioning of its government. We also know that mass shootings cause stress and trauma in the communities where they occur (Norris 2007). Gun violence directly contributes to a decrease in credit scores, home values, retail business and hurts individuals' ability to climb the ladder of opportunity (Irvin-Erickson, et al. 2017). In places such as Chicago's south side, where guns are responsible for 85% of all homicides (*Economist* 2017) and the murder rate is ten times that of nearby neighborhoods (Christensen 2014), daily gun violence perpetuates a cycle of trauma and communal breakdown that creates the conditions for still more public violence. President Obama offered in his eulogies a vision of America where empathy, vigorous debate, and reason all guide a sense of community and create a nation that cares for its citizens as much as its citizens care for it. Confronting gun violence will require engagement by a mass movement of concerned citizens.

Second, President Obama's failure to achieve reform, points to the need for campaign finance reform. Because money is so loosely regulated in the American political system, organizations like the National Rifle Association wield enormous influence. After Newtown, those in favor of reform had public opinion and good arguments on their side. They had the moral authority of twenty dead children. Yet, Congress did not act. Without substantial reduction in the power of special interests such as the NRA, this pattern will continue. In fact, the power of

the gun lobby has grown stronger over the past decades. If there exists a boundary between things achievable and unachievable by the rhetorical presidency (Tulis 1987), gun reform currently lies outside the boundary of the possible. Only political reform could change that situation.

This study suggests several avenues for future research. Future research should examine how other presidents use the gun issue. Do they use eulogy in the same way that Obama did? Additionally, future research should look at the contours of the gun rights movement. While Cook and Goss (2014; Goss 2005) conducted important research on the gun rights movement, it is important to consider the evolution of the movement since this study. If anything, the movement seems to have gained influence after the election of Donald Trump. Executive Vice President of the NRA, Wayne LaPierre, has already met with Trump on multiple occasions. It is important to consider how this influence shapes the gun debate in the future. Finally, future research should be conducted into the impact of public health framing for gun control. Goffman (1974) recognized the impact of framing on communication of public messages, and scholars should continue to investigate the effectiveness of the public health frame for the gun violence crisis.

Since beginning this research, there have been dozens of mass shootings and tens of thousands of people killed by guns. On the day of the Sandy Hook massacre, I made the decision to write about the topic. If the deaths of 20 children would not spur the public to enact new gun safety measures, what will it take to shift the discussion? Rather than break down the barriers to reform, Sandy Hook only revealed more starkly what the barriers are and how resistant they are to change. Since I began this research, mass shootings have increased in frequency and mortality. In 2016, a shooter in Orlando, Florida attacked the Pulse Nightclub and took 49 lives. On

October 1, 2017, a shooter who had stockpiled weaponry in a hotel suite in Las Vegas opened fire on a country music festival and killed 58; the scene was a literal killing field. On November 5, 2017, a gunman killed 25 at a church service in Sutherland Springs, Texas while the parishioners worshipped. On Valentine's Day 2018, a former student of Margery Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida killed 17 of his former classmates. In the wake of the shooting in Parkland, the students of Stoneman Douglas spoke out and gained an audience with the president, Donald Trump. Once again, the advocates for reform are engaged in the public debate over gun violence. It remains to be seen, however, if their efforts can be successful. This study of Obama's attempt to enact reform reveals the many barriers that must be overcome to produce meaningful action.

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[1] 2014 is the last time that the CDC collected gun violence data (Mascia 2015). In June 2015, Congress rejected an amendment that would have resumed CDC data collection on gun violence statistics. This vote would be the only action on gun violence taken in the wake of the mass shooting at Emanuel AME church in Charleston, South Carolina.